HEARING FAITH:
MUSICAL PRACTICE AND SPIRIT-FILLED WORSHIP IN A CONTEMPORARY
AFRICAN AMERICAN CHURCH

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ABSTRACT

WILL BOONE: Hearing Faith: Musical Practice and Spirit-filled Worship in a Contemporary African American Church
(Under the direction of Jocelyn Neal)

_Hearing Faith_ offers an experience-centered exploration of musical practice among African American Spirit-filled Christians—a group of believers whose core religious identity centers on direct experiential knowledge of the Holy Spirit. The dissertation shows how these believers use music and dance not simply as media to communicate about religious belief, but as practices that help them negotiate existential challenges and complexities. In doing so, it brings a new perspective to the thriving and contentious scholarly dialogue about black churches, and demonstrates how the methodologies of ethnomusicology and existential anthropology can help build upon and expand the advances of this dialogue. _Hearing Faith’s_ claims grow out of immersive ethnography with one independent African American congregation in Durham, North Carolina, and additional field research with African American Spirit-filled Christians in central North Carolina and Houston, Texas.

Chapter 1 articulates the concept of a Spirit-filled imagination—a base of intellectual and embodied knowledge that both guides and grows out of the community’s practices, shaping what worshipers do and value. Chapters 2 and 3 build on this discussion by showing how this concept operates in moments of worship. Six case studies—three in each chapter—explore how musical practice and the Spirit-filled imagination are used by worshipers to negotiate particularly complex existential issues (such as: the presence of levity within
moments of gravity; the need to be empowered in a present that emerges at the meeting place of an imperfect past and an uncertain future; and the struggle to deal with unspeakable loss).

African American Spirit-filled Christians embrace both Old and New Testament declarations of the mysteriousness of human life. They frequently declare that “God’s ways are not our ways,” and that “For now we see through a glass, darkly.” *Hearing Faith* claims that working to better understand how these believers use musical practice to edify and empower themselves in the face of such inscrutability can illuminate a process familiar to most humans, that of negotiating the twin necessities of accepting the depth of life’s mysteries and acting in the face of those mysteries.
To WTB, Sr. and JOP, Jr., guides in blood and spirit.

For AHB
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INTRODUCTION

“The Black Church is Dead,” screamed the headline from a 2010 article written by Princeton professor of African American studies Eddie Glaude. Of course, Glaude clarified in the first paragraph, the majority of African Americans still go to church, “but the idea of this venerable institution as central to black life and as a repository for the social and moral conscience of the nation has all but disappeared.” It was not the first time that an intellectual had declared the death of the black church, nor will it likely be the last. But Glaude’s article sparked a firestorm. The story was picked up by major news outlets such as The New York Times and National Public Radio; the blogosphere erupted with debate; and a major

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2Ibid.

3See, for example, religious studies professor William David Hart’s comments on Glaude’s article: “To reread Friedrich Nietzsche, Max Weber, E. Franklin Frazier, C. Eric Lincoln, Gayraud Wilmore and others is to be reminded of how old this declension narrative is. They all proclaimed, in one way or another, the death of God, the disenchantment of the world, the ‘living death’ of the Negro Church, the death of the Negro Church, and the deradicalization of the Black Church.” Hart, “The Afterlife of the Black Church,” Religion Dispatches (March 9, 2010) http://www.religiondispatches.org/archive/atheologies/2331/updated_with_response%3A_the_black_church_is_dead%E2%80%94long_live_the_black_church/.


symposium on the future of black churches was hosted by Columbia University.\(^6\) Unfolding on a national, mass-mediated stage, this lively and contentious dialogue seemed to suggest a moment of crisis.

In a sense, this conversation has been a modern-day iteration of the famous turn of the century conflict between W.E.B DuBois and Booker T. Washington that pitted resistance against assimilation. Or, perhaps more accurately, this conversation shows that this conflict has never disappeared, only been modified—and become more or less tense—according to the times. Familiar and well-worn binary oppositions have, in fact, been rhetorical centerpieces of the contemporary dialogue: priestly versus prophetic; spiritual versus worldly; conservative versus progressive; prosperity versus liberation.

Most of the participants in the conversation seemed to agree that, for too long, scholars who have worked on black churches have simply “picked sides” in these binary oppositions. For decades there had been a sense among many African American scholars—in history, theology, African American studies, and other disciplines—that they stood in solidarity with black churches as inheritors of the politically progressive and socially activist legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement. This message reverberated loudly through the work of some of the most influential African American scholars of the post-Civil Rights era, including the black liberation theology of James Cone and the prophetic philosophy of Cornel West.\(^7\) But in the second decade of the 21st century, many

\(^6\)Video of a roundtable discussion that was part of this event can be found at “Is the Black Church Dead? A Roundtable on the Future of Black Churches,” http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7r8Djfxu1Bk. A transcript of this discussion is available here: http://ircpl.org/2010/rethinking-religion/events/transcripts/is-the-black-church-dead-3/.

scholars, like Glaude, have recognized that this partnership is not so straightforward. They see black Christian institutions that are deeply invested in social conservatism and a gospel of prosperity built on a selective reading of the Bible that Christianizes the ethos of consumer culture, and they recognize that something has been omitted from the academic narratives.\footnote{Glaude claims in an NPR interview that it was his reaction to an African American-funded pro-life billboard in Atlanta that led to his writing the essay, “The Black Church is Dead.” “Scholar Signals the End of the Black Church,” NPR (April 23, 2010) http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=126219404.}

“We’ve told ourselves a story that flattens the complexity,” Glaude said with an air of exasperation at the Columbia University roundtable on the future of black churches.\footnote{See “Roundtable on the Future of Black Churches,” comments from Eddie Glaude beginning at 49:20.} A call to explore this complexity was at the heart of the dialogue about black churches that erupted in 2010.

In the years leading up to Glaude’s proclamation, this exploration had, in fact, already begun. Harvard theologian Jonathan Walton, one of the leading figures in this line of inquiry, notes that “many of those who discovered a message of hope in Martin Luther King also packed into the cathedral to hear [prosperity preaching televangelist] Rev. Ike on Saturday night.”\footnote{Jonathan Walton, Watch This! The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 232.} Walton’s examinations of black televangelism and its audience paint a picture of black Christians drawing on diverse—and what sometimes appear to be ideologically irreconcilable—resources to help them navigate the complexities of contemporary life. Other scholars, working from sociological, historical, and religious studies perspectives have also helped reveal a more complex portrait of African American Christianity.\footnote{From sociology see: Shayne Lee, TD Jakes: America’s New Preacher (New York: New York University Press, 2005); and Milmon Harrison, Righteous Riches: The Word of Faith Movement in Contemporary African American Religion (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). From history see Anthea Butler, Women in the Church of God in Christ: Making a Sanctified World (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press,}
What is lacking, however, are sustained inside-out studies that look closely at contemporary practice. Certainly, there are anthropological, ethnomusicological, and qualitative fieldwork-based sociological examinations of African American Christian congregations and practices. But these studies—focused primarily on experience and belief, musical change/evolution, or cultural identity—have rarely engaged the larger kinds of debates that unfold in the national media. And, conversely, those larger debates have rarely engaged these studies. There remains a disconnect between those who speak about black churches on a national stage and the detailed examination of what actually happens in black churches. In a sense, these lines of inquiry are divided along one of the central dialectics of African American Christianity, that between the priestly and the prophetic. In their landmark 1990 sociological study of 1,800 primarily African American Christian institutions, C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya claimed that “priestly functions… involve only those activities concerned with worship and maintaining the spiritual life of members,” while “prophetic functions refer to involvement in political concerns and activities in the wider community.” While the dialogue around black churches in the national media has foregrounded the prophetic, the fieldwork-based dialogue has foregrounded the priestly. What has been lost, then, is the extent to which these concepts are always in a dialectical


13C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 12. The dialectic between the priestly and prophetic was the first of six polarized concepts identified by the authors as key to their “dialectical model” of the Black Church. The other five were: other-worldly versus this-worldly; universalism versus particularism; communal versus privatistic; charismatic versus bureaucratic; and resistance versus accommodation.
relationship. As Lincoln and Mamiya put it, “Every black church is involved with both functions.”  

_Hearing Faith_ takes the presence of this dialectic as an established fact and as the starting place for its analyses. Importantly, however, this dissertation takes a more expansive view of the prophetic than it is commonly afforded. While this concept is often explicitly connected to electoral politics, legislative action, and social activism, in my view those realms of activity do not stand as ends on their own. If the prophetic is concerned with them, it is only in their capacity to function as a means to the greater end of alleviating existential struggle. Thus, _Hearing Faith_ takes this broader concept—the response to existential struggle—as the domain of the prophetic. This includes electoral politics and social activism, but also much smaller-scale activities, such as a single church community’s efforts to edify and empower itself in the midst of crisis or uncertainty.

At the heart of _Hearing Faith_ is the claim that musical practice does not simply reiterate doctrine or tenets of belief, but is, in fact, a means through which people negotiate the challenges of life and belief. When they encounter the limits of rational understanding, when they face paradoxes from the scripture or the pulpit, or when they find their deepest convictions tested, musical practice becomes a way of working it out; a way of creating meaningful encounters that guide and empower people to navigate these struggles of existence.

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14Lincoln and Mamiya, _The Black Church_, 12.

15_Hearing Faith_’s conception of the prophetic draws from the ideas of Cornel West, who writes that “existential freedom empowers people to fight for social freedom,” and who claims that “the distinctive features of prophetic activity are Pascalian leaps of faith in the capacity of human beings to transform their circumstances, engage in relentless criticism and self-criticism, and project visions, analyses, and practices of social freedom.” The first quote comes from Cornel West, _Prophesy Deliverance!,_ 18. The second is from West, “The Prophetic Tradition in Afro-America,” in _African American Religious Thought: An Anthology_, edited by Eddie Glaude and Cornel West (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 1037.
The musical practices of one African American church, Faith Assembly Christian Center, an approximately 150-member pentecostal church in Durham, North Carolina, are the central analytical focus of *Hearing Faith*.¹⁶ This church is not representative of black churches as a whole, nor should it necessarily be taken as a model for others to follow. But close and sustained attention to one church gives us a rich picture of what musical practice _does_—and has the potential to do—in the context of a local religious community. It affords us the opportunity to explore in detail how one group of believers negotiates the challenges and contradictions of life as contemporary African American Christians.

Ultimately, this dissertation is meant to serve as a model. Its focus on musical practice as a realm of existential negotiation could conceivably be applied to any congregation that values music making. More broadly, the exploration of practice at the community level as a realm in which people negotiate contradiction, struggle, and uncertainty can help us understand how moments of large-scale ideological crisis—like the one suggested by Eddie Glaude’s “The Black Church is Dead”—could be negotiated at the national level. In other words, *Hearing Faith* does not argue that there is not a crisis in contemporary black churches. The issues that many prophetically-minded scholars frequently critique—the presence of sexism, homophobia, and the uncritical embrace of consumer culture—are realities in many black churches. But while these issues are ideologically divisive, believers across the ideological spectrum nevertheless unite through worship each week in churches across the country. Despite sometimes irreconcilable differences of

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¹⁶Throughout this dissertation I follow the example of leading pentecostal studies scholars such as Douglas Jacobsen, Amos Yong, and James K.A. Smith in my use of the term “pentecostal” with a small-p. This usage does not connote a particular denominational affiliation but instead refers to “the diversity of pentecostal/charismatic theologies while at the same time recognizing important family resemblances and shared sensibilities.” See James K.A. Smith, *Thinking in Tongues: Pentecostal Contributions to Christian Philosophy*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), xvii.
opinion, these churchgoers still share many of the same existential struggles—for example, inadequate access to resources, health problems or concerns, dealing with loss, or the ongoing resurgence of personal and religious doubt—that they deal with and negotiate through worship practice. Thus, I believe that the practices of everyday believers may be one of the best places to begin to look for approaches to larger issues or crises. This is why *Hearing Faith* adopts an “inside out” perspective.\(^{17}\) The inside out perspective focuses more attention on the question “What do black Christians do?” than “What do they believe?” This perspective zooms in on the areas where people within a particular community excel; at areas where, as renowned folklorist Henry Glassie puts it, “people are articulate and powerful and in control.”\(^{18}\)

Why Music?

Musical practice provides an especially strong medium through which to study believers’ negotiation of the challenges of life and belief. Scholars have long argued for sacred music’s importance as a central facet of African American worship, as a catalyst for social and political action, and, more broadly, as a medium for defining and declaring black identity.\(^{19}\) In the 21\(^{st}\) century, however, it seems to be increasingly difficult for scholars from the prophetically-engaged tradition to deal with some of the most prevalent kinds of African American church music. In fact, though dozens of prominent theologians, clergy, historians,

\(^{17}\)I borrow the idea of working from the inside out from Henry Glassie. See Glassie, *Passing the Time in Ballymenone: Culture and History of an Ulster Community* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), 86.

\(^{18}\)Glassie, *Passing the Time in Ballymenone*, 86.

philosophers, African American studies scholars, and others have participated in the dialogue sparked by Glaude’s “The Black Church is Dead” article, very few have said anything about music. Part of the reason for this omission, I believe, is that many of the most notable 21st century trends in African American church music are, on the surface, directly at odds with the values that prophetically-minded black Christian intellectuals espouse. While gospel music has been intertwined with commercial structures since it emerged in the 1920s, in the last two or three decades it has increasingly been disseminated by major media conglomerates and has borrowed ever more freely from the look, sound, and marketing strategies of the secular entertainment world. Concomitantly with the growth of this industry, many black churches have adopted a “praise and worship” model of music-making, where microphone-wielding singers sing to the congregation. Even if participation is encouraged, the appearance is one of separate “performers” and “audience.” Often, the songs sung are versions of popular, commercially successful recordings (or a mix of these songs and more traditional material). Such commercialized musical phenomena are deeply troubling to many intellectuals. If black churches are supposed to present a prophetic witness—an “indictment of the powers that be,” including capitalism, corporatism, and materialism—then a musical practice that is thoroughly intertwined with these powers is a threat to the fundamental goals these scholars hope to accomplish. Their only choice, then, is to ignore it or condemn it. Prominent theologian Obery Hendricks, for example, took the latter route.

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20Columbia professor Josef Sorett did comment on “cultural aesthetics” is one of his replies to Glaude, see “‘This is the Air I Breathe: Unpacking Post-Black Church Proclamations,” http://www.religiondispatches.org/archive/atheologies/2331/updated_with_response%3A_the_black_church_is_dead%E2%80%94long_live_the_black_church/.


22The phrase “indicting the powers that be” comes from comments made by theologian Obery Hendricks at the Columbia symposium. It can be found around 53:00 at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7r8Djfxu1Bk.
when he wrote in an essay that contemporary gospel music is merely “an opiate, a palliative, a drug” that sedates black believers and prevents them from working against the social and political forces that continue to oppress them.  

Hendricks’ claims are not entirely unfounded—social justice has not been the primary focus of contemporary gospel lyrics, and few artists seem to be explicitly concerned with undermining the market-driven status quo. But his insistence on drawing conceptual boundaries obscures contemporary musical practice’s potential to reach people on less explicitly sociopolitical levels. The research of a small number of scholars in the last ten years has in fact shown that musical practice is one of the primary “integrative” forces among African American Christians. For example, in an article published in the *Black Music Research Journal*, activist and ordained clergy Melinda Weekes argued that music has demonstrated a unique power to bridge socioeconomic divides among black believers. She writes,

…the contemporary gospel music has achieved what the traditional black church as a whole has failed to accomplish in the post-civil rights era: a mechanism for spiritual and cultural sustenance for both ends of its bifurcated community—the African-American middle class and the African-American underclass…[The] music offered itself as a channel towards the recovery of collective consciousness lost in the post-civil rights era.

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23See the first essay, “‘I am the Holy Dope Dealer’: The Problem with Gospel Music Today,” in Hendricks’ collection *The Universe Bends Toward Justice: Radical Reflections on the Bible, the Church and the Body Politic* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 36. Hendricks defines “contemporary gospel music” as “the Gospel music produced since the 1990s” (5). Though I will unpack this category later, for now this broad definition will suffice.


25Weekes, “This House, This Music,” 56.
Weekes claims that contemporary gospel music is highly effective at establishing a “collective consciousness” across socioeconomic strata. Deborah Smith Pollard and Birgitta Johnson have similarly demonstrated the power of music in contemporary black churches to bridge generational divides and to unify congregants with an increasingly diverse range of interests and life experiences.\textsuperscript{26} *Hearing Faith* builds on the work of these scholars, turning to contemporary musical practice as something that has been shown to have potential to cut across lines of class, generation, and ideology. This integrative force lends musical practice the power to become an important site for believers’ negotiation of the challenges of life and belief. Musical practice does not simply present or contain the priestly or the prophetic; the spiritual or the emotional; or the resistant or the assimilationist. Instead, it provides a space in which people work out the complex intertwining of these forces which ultimately shape their lives. By exploring musical practice as a site for existential negotiation within one church, *Hearing Faith* begins to open up the space necessary to tell ourselves the more complex story that Eddie Glaude calls for. It offers a way to study contemporary black churches as spaces in which life is actually lived in all its unforgiving complexity.\textsuperscript{27}

**Musical Practice and Processes of Negotiation**

On the surface, Faith Assembly Christian Center’s worship—like that of most African American pentecostals—is fraught with contradictions. Believers declare “let go and let

\textsuperscript{26} Johnson, “‘Oh For a Thousand Tongues to Sing;’” and Pollard, *When the Church Becomes Your Party*, see especially Chapter 1.

\textsuperscript{27} *Hearing Faith* is certainly not the first study to do, or call for, this kind of work, though the relatively small body of scholarship in this vein that has been focused explicitly on black churches has not, for the most part, engaged with broad mass-mediated conversations about black churches. For noteworthy examples of practice-centered work see Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), and Robert Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: the Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005). I borrow the notion of “unforgiving complexity” from Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1995), 104.
God,” with the same fervor that they encourage one another to “make it happen.” At times—in language strikingly similar to complaints levied against pentecostals by African American intellectuals in the prophetic tradition—they critique ecstatic worship as “mere emotionalism.” Other times they call a service without ecstatic worship spiritually “dead.” They passionately assert that their Christian walk is about nobody but “me and God,” all the while claiming that Christian discipleship is impossible without the communal unity of “one accord.”

At Faith Assembly believers do not necessarily seek simple solutions to these apparent contradictions. Rather, they engage in complex and ongoing processes of negotiation. Bishop Leroy McKenzie, the church’s founder and head pastor until his death in October of 2012, regularly drew from Isaiah 55:8, claiming that “[God’s] thoughts are not our thoughts and neither are His ways our ways.” There is no reason to assume, McKenzie suggests, that the answers should be simple or immediately clear to humans. From the human perspective, life is full of contradictions, senselessness, and, often, apparent chaos. McKenzie

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28 The first is a common phrase and the title of a popular song. The second is also a popular phrase and the 2011 slogan for Faith Assembly. A banner saying “make it happen” was displayed prominently in the sanctuary throughout the year.

29 “On one accord” is a biblical phrase commonly used by pentecostals to refer to an intense state of spiritually-inspired unity. The phrase can be found in Joshua 9:2, Philippians 2:2, and throughout the book of Acts. All biblical citations in this dissertation will come from the King James Version, as that is the translation used most commonly at Faith Assembly.

30 “Spirit-filled” vs. “pentecostal”: As an independent church, Faith Assembly is not part of any official denominational organization, and, thus, members do not identify themselves denominationally. While the church’s founder Bishop Leroy McKenzie told me that he was comfortable with the description of Faith Assembly as a small-p pentecostal church (and used the term occasionally himself), he preferred the term “Spirit-filled” as a more accurate encapsulation of what he believed were the core elements of Faith Assembly’s identity. In many contexts throughout this dissertation I use the terms “pentecostal” and “Spirit-filled” interchangeably. When appropriate, however, I have attempted to use pentecostal when describing a broad contingent of African American believers and Spirit-filled when referring specifically to believers at Faith Assembly.
and believers at his church repeatedly emphasized to me their belief that it is only through a sustained process of seeking God that solutions will ever become clear.

For these believers, then, surface level contradictions are better conceived as dialectics—opposing poles that must be constantly negotiated as pentecostals strive to act in ways that can best help them realize their particular vision of human flourishing. Importantly, this process of negotiation requires non- and extra-linguistic forms of communication. The power of words should not be underemphasized, believers say, but words are inherently limited in what they are able to communicate. In fact, the extent to which African American pentecostals employ a range of non- and extra-linguistic communicative practices—including cries, moans, shouts, laughter, aestheticized breath, glossolalia (speaking in tongues), song, instrumental music, laying on of hands, gesture, and dance—suggests the significance that these practices have for communicating what is not easily expressed through linear language. Thus, music and dance are crucial to the processes through which African American pentecostals strive to directly experience, and to be edified and empowered by, an inscrutable God; a God who they believe created, encompasses, and controls all opposing forces.

Ultimately, Hearing Faith’s sustained attention to musical practice in one church participates in many scholarly conversations—musicological discussions of popular religious music; ethnomusicological discussions of experience and belief; interdisciplinary discussions that constitute pentecostal studies; and contemporary mass-mediated debates about black churches. One of the key innovations of this work, however, is its attention to the intertwined relationship between religious experience, music, and popular culture in the lives of

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31 Verses from the 18th Chapter of Proverbs were commonly cited and strongly emphasized at Faith Assembly during my research there, especially verse 21: “Death and life are in the power of the tongue.” So, while richly-developed traditions of extra- and non-linguistic practices certainly suggest the limited communicative ability of language, words nevertheless have the potential to wield—at times extreme—power.
contemporary African American believers. Recent studies foregrounding popular culture in African American Christian practice have said very little about music; those scholars who have investigated African American religious popular music have generally not engaged deeply with the experiential and communicative dimensions of worship practice; and scholars who have investigated in detail the experiential and communicative dimensions of African American pentecostal practice have remained relatively silent about the role of commercial popular music.\(^\text{32}\) The bulk of Faith Assembly’s musical repertoire—like the repertoire of many similar churches—comes from commercial recordings released in the last 15 years. Worshipers at Faith Assembly do not, however, passively receive popular gospel music.\(^\text{33}\) Using musical performance and dance they engage in often complex and multilayered acts of recontextualization. Exploring the experiential and communicative


\(^{33}\)“Gospel music” is the most common descriptor used by believers at Faith Assembly (and most black pentecostals I have worked with) to describe the genre of their chosen worship music—primarily commercial recordings made by African American artists whose lyrics proclaim Christian messages. Stylistically, however, this music is quite diverse and some songs that Faith Assembly incorporates into their worship services have little recognizable relation to music that has traditionally been labeled “gospel” or “black gospel.” In the interest of brevity, I will for now use the term “gospel music” synonymously with “African American Christian popular music.” In Chapter 2 I will unpack some of the stylistic distinctions that are relevant to Faith Assembly’s repertoire.
dimensions of these acts shows the extent to which religious belief and practice in a church like Faith Assembly is shaped by a dialogue between the local and the mass-mediated.

Going beyond discourse explicitly connected to black churches, then, this dissertation joins scholarly conversations about how consumers of popular culture can and do transform their acts of consumption into acts of creation and re-creation. The phenomena it investigates at Faith Assembly—the church’s sampling and recontextualization of sounds and messages from recordings, and their reinterpretation of recordings through dance—are similar to phenomena in many other cultural arenas such as hip-hop producers’ creation of sample-based music, *Harry Potter* fans’ creation and sharing of their own newly-written tales featuring characters from the series, or amateur musicians creating YouTube videos that feature them playing along to popular recordings. Faith Assembly perhaps differs from these examples in the extent to which popular culture is, for them, bound up with “ultimate concerns” like eternal salvation. Nevertheless, the analyses and conclusions presented in *Hearing Faith* can resonate broadly, furthering the scholarly conversation about the ways in which popular culture interweaves with peoples’ lives in a variety of cultural contexts.

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34 This is a broad and interdisciplinary scholarly conversation. In music, the literature on hip-hop DJs and producers has extensively explored these issues. See, for example, Joseph Schloss, *Making Beats: the Art of Sample-based Hip-hop* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004); and Mark Katz, *Groove Music: The Art and Culture of the Hip-hop DJ* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). The work of Henry Jenkins has been at the forefront of exploring the ways that consumers creatively engage with other areas of popular culture. His foundational work is *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992).


36 The formulation “ultimate concerns” is most associated with the work of theologian Paul Tillich. See especially Chapter 1 in *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2001 [1958]).
Stance and Identity in “The Field”\textsuperscript{37}

In recent decades ethnographers have repeatedly emphasized the importance of acknowledging that all academic observation and analysis comes from somewhere; that there is no objective and transcendent “view from nowhere.”\textsuperscript{38} Thus, it is important that authors strive to reveal hidden bias by placing themselves in their work. Scholars must, however, approach this kind of reflexivity carefully. As anthropologist Jennifer Robertson puts it in a 2002 essay,

Family history, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, and religion, among other distinctions, can be usefully woven into an ethnographic narrative, but only if they are not left self-evident as essentialized qualities that are magically synonymous with self-consciousness, or, for that matter, with intellectual engagement and theoretical rigor.\textsuperscript{39}

My position at Faith Assembly is inextricably interwoven with the claims that \textit{Hearing Faith} makes. I participated in the church as a musician for over six years before I transitioned to modes of thinking and acting that I explicitly considered research.\textsuperscript{40} I have continued performing as a musician at Faith Assembly while writing this dissertation. A

\textsuperscript{37}The terms stance and identity here are used in the specific sense defined by Jeff Todd Titon in a 1986 article to mean the role one assigns oneself as a fieldworker and the role one is assigned by one’s consultants, respectively. Titon, “Stance, Role, and Identity in Fieldwork among Folk Baptists and Pentecostals,” \textit{American Music} 3/1 (Spring, 1986), 18-19. I use quotation marks around “The Field” because—as will shortly be made clear—Faith Assembly was “home” for me for years before it became a site for fieldwork. The quotation marks also index the constructedness of all “fields” associated with ethnomusicology, a topic cogently discussed by Melvin Butler in “Songs of Pentecost: Experiencing Music, Transcendence, and Identity in Jamaica and Haiti,” PhD diss. (New York University, 2005). See especially Chapter 1, “Fielding Questions: Positionality and Reflexivity in Contemporary Ethnomusicology.”

\textsuperscript{38}Thomas Nagel brought the phrase to prominence with his book \textit{The View From Nowhere} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986). For a discussion of the emergence of anthropological and ethnomusicological literature that examines the role of the individual scholar’s point of view in “constructing the field” see Chapter 1 in Melvin Butler, “Songs of Pentecost,” and a number of the essays in Gregory Barz and Timothy Cooley, eds., \textit{Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).


\textsuperscript{40}I have been affiliated with the church since 2002, though I temporarily relocated in 2005 and was not involved in services there for about two years, until I returned in 2007.
vignette will help illustrate how thoroughly my position at Faith Assembly shapes the thrust of the current dissertation.

*Sunday Morning, December 2, 2012*

Faith Assembly’s sanctuary is packed with upwards of 100 churchgoers. Being the first Sunday of the month, the 30 or so members who have earned leadership titles—such as minister or deacon—wear formal black. Some of the ministers wear white clerical collars. This tradition of dress brings a weightiness to first Sunday services, and the aura of religious devotion is particularly thick in the sanctuary this morning.

The Praise Team—the small group of singers who lead musical worship—have been on a 24-hour fast. Faith Assembly’s head pastor Mary McKenzie, “discerning” tensions among members of the Praise Team, had firmly recommended (“ordered” perhaps is not too strong a word) that these singers “starve their natural bodies” so that God might better “feed their spirits.”

The singers ascend the stage at the front of the sanctuary. The musicians—a Hammond B3 organist, a drummer, and me on electric guitar—are on the floor level to their left. We face the congregation from behind a waist-high partition that marks the “band pit.” From the drummer’s first four-count much of the congregation is wholeheartedly engaged, clapping, dancing, and singing along. The Praise Team sings two uptempo selections followed by a slower, more meditative song called “Flow to You.” At the song’s conclusion the organist sustains the tonic chord, its sound merging with the swelling sizzle of the drummer’s cymbals. The lead singer shifts into a heightened mode of chant that believers call exhortation. With phrases like “If God has done anything for you, you owe him a praise!” the

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41 The following chapter includes a detailed discussion of leadership titles at Faith Assembly and how they are earned.
lead singer simultaneously encourages and admonishes the congregation. I answer each of her verbal blasts with blue note-inflected flourishes on the guitar. The Praise Team singers also answer her with a continually shifting chorus of affirmations: “Hallelujah!” “Thank you, Jesus!” “Yes!” Volume swells, bodies sway. Shoes are slipped off as legs and feet that know the intricacies of pentecostal dance in their deepest muscle memory begin to move. The organist chromatically walks up the bass, scale degrees $3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - 7 - 1$. It is one of the most recognizable musical tropes in ecstatic African American worship. Across the congregation, members burst into the vigorous dance known as “shouting” while the musicians play the quick double-time rhythms of “shout music.”

For ten minutes or more the church shouts. The Master of Ceremonies repeatedly declares that “we have to move on with the service.” But it is to no avail. Eventually, he simply ushers onstage the singer who is scheduled to sing a solo. The force of her elevated presence quells the activity to some extent. The drummer drops the quick pulse and we—the musicians—return to a sustained wash of sound. We stop playing altogether as a recorded backing track breaks in over the sound system. The song is called “Yes.” It is opposite in almost every way to the preceding shout music; slow, calm, and texturally sparse. Gradually, the experiential tenor of the congregation shifts. Many members become still, bowing their heads or raising their hands in the air. The soloist sings an inspired rendition of the song. When the recording ends, the organist picks up the minor key vamp that concluded the song, the drummer enters, and I play the melody in a loud, wailing, overdriven style. After several measures the vocalist begins singing again, repeating the closing lines over and over: “There

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42 The Praise and Worship portion of worship services at Faith Assembly—the first hour which is composed primarily of music and dance—is presided over by what they call an MC (Master of Ceremonies). The MC is usually not the head pastor, but one of the other two members of the church who have also achieved the title “pastor.” The use and significance of titles as well as the role of the MC will be further explored in the next chapter.
is more that I require of thee / So let your heart and soul say ‘yes.’” Pastor Mary McKenzie comes to the front of the sanctuary as if to begin her sermon, but does not pray an opening prayer as she normally would. Instead she says to the congregation, “If you have a ‘yes’ in your spirit I want you to come line up in front of the altar.” The majority of the church comes forward. McKenzie moves down the line, praying for congregants one at a time. She lays her right hand on each forehead and speaks words of instruction, discipline, blessing, healing, hope, and so on; what the faithful recognize as divinely-given prophetic utterances.

For about 45 minutes we continue playing “Yes.” The song ebbs and flows beneath Pastor McKenzie’s prayers and the heterogeneous sounds of the Spirit-filled congregants, some of whom speak in tongues, weep, or intone affirmations of “hallelujah,” or “yes, Lord.” The organist and drummer hold down a foundation while the vocalist and I engage in a continuous melodic interplay. Some believers are “slain in the Spirit,” falling back as they receive McKenzie’s prayers. A group of ushers catches each falling believer, lowering them gently to the floor. Pastor Garry Mitchell—who is second in command at Faith Assembly—follows and closely observes McKenzie as she moves along the line of congregants. Discerning the “flow of the Spirit,” he directs the musicians accordingly, gesturing for crescendos, decrescendos, or flourishes from the guitar or drums.

After Pastor McKenzie has prayed for all those who came to the altar at her first request, she begins assembling specific groups to receive prayer. Separating them by gender, she prays for all of the female deaconesses, then all of the male deacons. The same follows for the ministers. She calls up those who dance in the church and prays for them, and then prays for the singers. She pauses and turns her eyes toward the band pit. “Musicians,” she says authoritatively, and follows with a stream of praise-words, “Hallelujah, thank you God.

43 “Deaconess” is a term used at Faith Assembly to refer to the wives of male Deacons.
Thank you, Jesus. Hallelujah. Thank you, Jesus, hallelujah.” She says, “We don’t need no music.” McKenzie then looks at the two teenage girls who had begun singing when she called the original soloist up for prayer. “You can just sing softly,” she says to them. “Sing very softly.”

I put my guitar down and the drummer, organist, and I walk out of the band pit and stand in front of Pastor McKenzie. Her eyes are piercing and intense. Since the Praise Team began singing well over an hour ago there has been a continuous stream of music. Cranked to extreme decibels and bouncing lively against the cinderblock walls, these soundwaves have filled and defined the space of the sanctuary throughout the service. With nothing but faint a cappella voices now sounding, the sonic contrast is staggering. “I need ya’ll to hold hands,” Pastor McKenzie says. As we take each other’s hand, she continues,

The Lord told me to pray for everything that handled the anointing. 
And God said because you handle the anointing, you must take your position very seriously. 
And you must study the Word of God, because you set the atmosphere in the things of God. 
And if you don’t work together and be a team on one accord, God said that, “You will deal with Me. You will not deal with Pastor. You will deal with Me. Because I have set you in the house to set the atmosphere. You’re a thermostat. And when your spirit’s not right, the atmosphere is not right.”

So today, I anoint you afresh. 
I didn’t choose you. [She points up.] God chose you. [She points to me.] And when God chose you, God justified you. And if God justified you then God is going to receive this anointing [I place] on you. [She lays her right hand forcefully on my head.] You’ll be able to do everything you need to do. Money will not be an option. Your family will be taken care of. Because the anointing takes care of everything! It breaks every yoke and it lifts every burden!

My eyes are closed. As McKenzie speaks the words “lifts every burden!” I relax completely and fall backward into the waiting arms of the male ushers who lay me on the floor with extreme care. The gentleness of the ushers seems strangely dissonant against
McKenzie’s forceful words and presence. “Perhaps another dialectic to write about in my
dissertation,” I think to myself, lying on the carpet. I open my eyes. The Pastor prays for the
drummer who does not fall. I reach out my hand and he helps me up. We walk back to the
band pit as McKenzie prays for the organist. I watch him closely as he slips into the arms of
the ushers.

When Pastor McKenzie called the musicians forward for prayer on this particular
Sunday, she cast a spotlight on an understanding about the role of music and musicians that
is generally agreed upon at Faith Assembly, and has been expressed to me many times during
my tenure at the church. Music helps “set the atmosphere.” At Faith Assembly, “atmosphere”
refers to a kind of experiential substrate that both encourages and reflects a particular mode
of devotion. Faith Assembly’s members might speak of “an atmosphere of praise,” or “an
atmosphere of healing.” Many factors play into how worshipers perceive a particular
atmosphere—for example, the type and intensity of congregational participation or the
semantic content of prayers or of song lyrics—but music is said to play a key role as a creator
and index of atmosphere. As McKenzie says, musicians function as a “thermostat,” or a
measurement of the relative “heat” of God’s presence.44

Atmosphere is vitally important for worshipers at Faith Assembly because it is
intertwined with the idea of anointing. When pentecostal believers speak of the anointing,
they refer to the operations of the Holy Spirit’s immanent presence. In different experiential
stages, the atmosphere relates to anointing in that it, 1) encourages the Spirit’s immanence to
manifest, as when Pastor Garry instructs the congregation to “Set the atmosphere so that the

44For an interesting parallel see Melvin Butler’s discussion of the importance of “heating up” in Haitian
Heavenly Army churches in “‘Nou kwe nan sentespri’ (We believe in the Holy Spirit): Music, Ecstasy, and
anointing can flow,” or 2) results from the Spirit’s immanence, as when Pastor McKenzie recognizes that “This is an anointed atmosphere.”\textsuperscript{45} Atmosphere is a kind of mood or sense that facilitates and reflects, but has no real power to effect transformation. The anointing is the \textit{active} agent. It does work. Based on her reading of the Bible McKenzie says that the anointing “destroys yokes,” “lifts burdens,” and “breaks curses.”\textsuperscript{46} Note the verbs of strength—destroy, lift, break. For pentecostal believers the anointing is power. It accomplishes. It gets results. It is through the anointing, believers say, that people are actually changed. Thus, if the anointing does not flow during a worship service, if it is hindered or blocked, then people will not receive God’s transformational power. They will “go home just like they came.”\textsuperscript{47} Pastor McKenzie asked the congregation in one sermon, “Why in the world are you coming to church if you don’t want the Holy Spirit…to change your situation?” She went on to say that, without the anointing, church was little more than a social gathering; churchgoers may learn something, they may be inspired or entertained, they may feel a sense of duty fulfilled, but their lives will not be refueled, refashioned, and re-empowered by God.\textsuperscript{48}

If music is critical to setting the atmosphere, and atmosphere is critical to the flow of the anointing, and the anointing is essential for church to have real spiritual significance, then musicians have a special role as a kind of gatekeeper and “thermostat.” They are in a position

\textsuperscript{45}These quotes come from April 17, 2011 and October 9, 2011 respectively.

\textsuperscript{46}Isaiah 10:27 is a frequently cited scripture among African American pentecostals: “And it shall come to pass in that day, that his burden shall be taken away from off thy shoulder, and his yoke from off thy neck, and the yoke shall be destroyed because of the anointing.”

\textsuperscript{47}Bishop McKenzie so often stressed the importance of “not leaving like you came” that when he passed away church members who designed the program for his “homegoing service” included in large letters on the front the phrase, “I won’t leave here like I came…”

\textsuperscript{48}Pastor Mary McKenzie, FACC, October 9, 2011.
to “handle the anointing,” as McKenzie said. My experience of being in this position undergirds and informs Hearing Faith at every turn. It is, in fact, central to the methodology of this dissertation.

In 2002 I began playing guitar at Faith Assembly at the request of one of my college classmates who was, at the time, the minister of music for the church. The church members warmly welcomed me, but I felt like an outsider and a complete stranger. I was the only white person there, and I had no experience with African American pentecostal music or practice. Musically, I struggled—with mixed results—to translate my prior knowledge of rock and blues into the language of contemporary gospel. More generally, I struggled to place myself; to understand my role; to interact with others according to the social, cultural, and religious boundaries that were (or were not) in play. Essentially, I was doing what all ethnographers must do when they begin fieldwork with a community they did not previously belong to. But I did not conceive of my actions in those terms. Though several years later I came to understand what I did at Faith Assembly in relation to the anthropological and ethnomusicological concept of participant-observation, initially my participation at Faith Assembly was, to draw on the words of anthropologist Michael Jackson, “an end in itself rather than a means of gathering closely observed data.”

I was “joining in without ulterior motive.”

I had no notion or intention of translating my experiences into theoretical concepts, or, conversely, using theoretical concepts to explain them. I was merely trying to understand what it was to be a musician in an African American pentecostal church so that I could perform that role as effectively as possible. When I began explicitly working on


50Ibid.
dissertation research in 2010, my long apprenticeship proved to be an extraordinarily valuable foundation on which to build. As I started to write about pentecostal musical practice for academic audiences, I was able to ground my “translation” in an embodied knowledge of the subject. Again, Michael Jackson’s observations resonate with my experience. He writes,

…by using one’s body in the same way as others in the same environment, one finds oneself informed by an understanding that may then be interpreted according to one’s own custom or bent, yet which remains grounded in a field of practical activity and thereby remains consonant with the experience of those among whom one has lived.51

Thus, my experiences setting the atmosphere and handling the anointing became a kind of theoretical frame on which to build *Hearing Faith*’s interpretive claims. In addition to drawing on what believers said about particular experiences, I could draw on embodied knowledge of what it felt like to be part of the community that brought that experience into existence. Even when I drew on academic literature to help facilitate the translation between pentecostal and academic communities, my assessment of this literature was grounded in my experiential understanding of African American pentecostal music making and worship.52

Nevertheless, my methodological orientation to this project—what I think of as “writing from the band pit”—introduced several complicating issues. Two of the most pressing among these are: 1) the fact that I was often deeply involved in creating the moments that I observed, and 2) the fact that, in the field, my identity as a researcher was often overshadowed by my identity as a participant.

51Ibid.

52To augment this discussion about my relative insiderness at Faith Assembly, I will point out that my experience of conflicting feelings of insiderness to outsideness is roughly equal in church and in the academy. I feel relatively at home in both places, though to some extent I remain a stranger. Moreover, my experiences in each site are an essential part of my understanding and critical engagement with the other.
As she prayed for the musicians in the vignette above, Pastor McKenzie claimed that God was saying to us, “when your spirit’s not right, the atmosphere is not right.” According to McKenzie’s voicing of what she heard in the Spirit, the atmosphere surrounding musical worship at Faith Assembly is, at least in part, a reflection of my spirit. Thus, McKenzie understands the moments of musical worship that I write about in this dissertation to be ineluctably shaped by my presence and participation as a musician. I agree with her. Clearly I am not a neutral observer. My own “spirit” is implicated in both what I experienced at Faith Assembly and the interpretive claims I make about musical practice there. This leads to further questions. On a fundamental level, what is my “spirit?” How is its relative rightness or wrongness assessed by the community in which I participate? And can I account for the ways that this spirit and this process of assessment affect what I observe as a researcher?

For African American pentecostals, spirit is an essential animating force; what God breathed into humans when He “breathed the breath of life” in Genesis 2:7. Pastor Mary McKenzie says that “without the Holy Spirit you cannot even formulate a thought in your mind.” In optimal conditions, the Holy Spirit and the human spirit are one in the same, but this equilibrium is very often disrupted, Pastor McKenzie says, by the “voice of the flesh.” And not only does the flesh misdirect the Spirit’s energies, but sometimes people “operate under demon spirits.” True knowledge of God, McKenzie suggests, comes only from those moments where human spirit and Holy Spirit are one. These moments are most common during activities in which believers consciously intend such spiritual purity—for example, scripture reading, prayer, and worship—but can occur anywhere and at any time.\(^54\)

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\(^{53}\) Pastor Mary McKenzie, FACC, February 17, 2013.

\(^{54}\) Glenn Hinson notes that while “the saints” of the Sanctified Church seek the Holy Spirit in a particularly focused manner during worship, “the Spirit’s visits transcend the particularities of context.” Sometimes they are
Pentecostals believe that spirit is a holistic essence that is not reducible to characteristics of the mind or body. Thus, they say that its operations cannot be rationally explained or predicted. To some extent, however, believers will assess someone’s spirit by the way it manifests itself in that person’s choices and actions. In this way, spirit functions similarly to what some of those who do not share pentecostals’ supernaturalist ontology might refer to as the subconscious or unconscious mind. Although by definition one cannot grasp the contents and mechanisms of the unconscious mind through rational thinking, longstanding traditions of psychology claim that it plays a large role in directing humans’ choices and actions. It harbors a complex network of memory, desire, and pre-rational knowledge that shapes the intentions, motivations, and presuppositions that drive us to act in particular ways. For those operating in a scientific (or naturalistic) mode of inquiry, then, what we do provides clues about the state of our unconscious minds in much the same way that, for those operating in a pentecostal mode of inquiry, what we do provides clues about the state of our spirits. Pastor McKenzie says that someone operating “in the flesh” or in a “wrong spirit” will be betrayed by his or her actions.55

According to McKenzie’s prayer, my actions as a musician had consequences for the church’s ability to worship properly. Thus, it was imperative that my actions reflected a “right spirit.” Given McKenzie’s expressed beliefs about the importance of a musician’s spirit—beliefs that have been expressed to me many times during my tenure at Faith Assembly—I have striven to have a right spirit. To do otherwise would be, at best, disrespectful to the church members and, at worst, an obstacle to the goals they hope to

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achieve through worship—salvation, deliverance, healing, and so on. But what does having a right spirit entail? And does this conflict with the scholarly enterprise?

Based on conversations I had with Bishop and Pastor McKenzie, as well as the contents of their sermons, having a right spirit means, for them, that one’s actions directly help manifest the work of the Holy Spirit. Right spirit is not synonymous with belief. Subscribing to a particular doctrine, dogma, or denomination cannot give one right spirit. Even some nonbelievers, according to Bishop McKenzie, frequently operate with a right spirit; God uses the saved and unsaved alike to accomplish His purposes. Thus, for Faith Assembly, my own right spirit was not dependent upon my uncritical acceptance of the beliefs professed by the church’s leaders. It is not that my beliefs did not matter—they would have certainly asked me to leave the church if I was, for example, openly proselytizing as a representative of another religion. But much more important than my beliefs was that they perceived my actions as an effective channel for the Spirit.

In fact, I had been participating at Faith Assembly for several years before Bishop McKenzie ever asked me about my beliefs. We were having lunch together one day and I was talking about my newly formed idea to use my experiences at Faith Assembly as the basis for a dissertation. He was supportive of the idea and started asking me about the life journey that had led me to it. I wasn’t recording our conversation, and I can only imagine that what I said came across as inelegant at best or inarticulate at worst. But what I intended to say was something like this:

"On June 5, 2011 McKenzie preached that “God will allow you to use His anointing if you’ve got any God in you…If his anointing works through Denzel Washington, Michael Jordan, Shaquille O’Neal? Here’s my point: if God can bless somebody who ain’t saved, what do you think he can do with those of us who are saved?”

I preface my presentation of this information in this way to draw attention to the fact that what we, as ethnographers, say about ourselves often reflects our use of the luxuries of rethinking, revision, and editing—luxuries that are not often afforded to our consultants. The disparity between who gets to revise and who does..."
I grew up in church—a predominantly white United Methodist church—but when I first came to Faith Assembly it had been several years since I had regularly attended any kind of worship service. With varying degrees of intensity and doubt, however, I had always thought of myself as a Christian believer. My experiences at Faith Assembly inspired me to become more actively and critically engaged with what embracing the identity “believer” means; how does it—and how should it—shape my choices and actions? Despite this sense of renewed commitment, I had not become a pentecostal. I had not received, nor was I actively seeking, the baptism of the Holy Ghost—an occurrence most pentecostals understand to be a defining part of their theology.58 Faith was an increasingly central part of my life, I said, but I was not sure if my faith was entirely consonant with what was most common at Faith Assembly.

When I told this—or tried my best to tell this—to McKenzie he nodded as if he understood clearly, smiled one of his characteristic smiles, and then the conversation moved on. At another lunch date shortly before McKenzie died we spoke again about matters of personal belief, and I rehashed my own story for him. McKenzie said, “God’s got a funny way about Him. We don’t really get to choose how we get to Him.”59

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58 In general, Holy Ghost Baptism is an experience of being powerfully filled with the Spirit that is evidenced by external manifestations—or “spiritual gifts”—most commonly speaking in tongues. Once one has received the baptism, pentecostals believe, that person operates in a spiritually empowered state and can accomplish things such as healing or casting out demons that cannot be accomplished by the unbaptized. I will take up the topic further in the following chapter.

For McKenzie, the encapsulation of my faith that I expressed to him apparently did not present an obstacle to my bringing a “right spirit” to the atmosphere of the church. He never explicitly questioned the consonance of my guitar playing with the goals of worship at Faith Assembly, and he concluded many of our conversations by thanking me for my “faithful spirit,” a phrase that importantly highlights the practical dimension of the idea of right spirit. McKenzie wanted to have a guitar player at his church, and if I kept showing up and playing my part decently well, that reliability was as much an indicator of my spirit as anything else.

This talk of spirit is necessarily nebulous. A fundamental elusiveness is a defining attribute of this part of ourselves—whether we call it spirit, or the unconscious, or “just the way I am.” But given my role at Faith Assembly and Pastor McKenzie’s insistence that musicians must have a “right spirit,” to fail to acknowledge this concept as significant to the current project would be intellectually irresponsible. From an academic standpoint, however, perhaps the more pressing question is not whether my spirit was right according to the church’s leaders, but how my being in a position in which my spirit was implicated affected what I observed in the course of my research.

The general thrust of intellectual endeavors in recent decades, be it represented in theories quantum or cultural, has pointed toward the notion that humans cannot make observations that do not bear the imprint of our presence. The fact that observation is taking place is an ineradicable attribute of what is being observed. This is perhaps more obvious in my work with Faith Assembly than it is for some other ethnographic work because of the extent of my involvement in creating the moments that I observed. But even as I
 acknowledge the inescapable fact of my influence, it is difficult—perhaps impossible—to
account for precisely how my presence affected what I observed.

At one extreme, given that I was part of the group providing musical accompaniment
for many of the moments that this dissertation explores, one could conceivably question if I
was merely shaping the music toward the ends that I wanted to observe. What if I was simply
confirming my own hypotheses; creating the evidence I had predetermined I was going to
find? Considering that I did not choose repertoire at Faith Assembly, and generally played a
following role, taking cues from the organist/keyboardist, it is unlikely that I could have
exerted the kind of influence implied by these questions. Moreover, I undertook research
activities that worked to control for such possibilities. I attended dozens of services in North
Carolina at churches theologically and demographically similar to Faith Assembly, where I
participated only as a congregant (not as a musician). I was also able to view worship in over
100 African American churches across the country through streaming and archived video of
services on the internet. Additionally, I spent several months in Houston, Texas in 2010,
attending services and conducting interviews with church leaders and musicians. With this
broad base for comparison, I can say that while there are local particularities at Faith
Assembly—shaped no doubt in some small way by my presence—my participation did not
make worship at Faith Assembly anomalous in the larger world of African American
pentecostalism.

In the course of my research, however, I did become aware of some more minor ways
that my presence shaped what happened at Faith Assembly. Certain decisions made by the
minister of music seemed connected to my being there. Guitar-centric songs such as “You
Are Good” and “Going to Another Level” by Israel and New Breed were almost certainly

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performed more often than they would have been had I (or another guitarist) not been there.\textsuperscript{60}

In a few moments I also glimpsed the possibility that churchgoers reigned in or modified their rhetoric as a result of my presence. In a meeting with the musicians and the audio department, two individuals engaged in a heated exchange and one accused the other of “nigger business.” The accused immediately pointed toward me with a somewhat distressed look as if to suggest, “You can’t say that with him around.” The accuser retorted, “Will’s been here for years, I’m not going to be fake because of him.” It is unwise to draw too many conclusions from emotional outbursts such as this one. Nevertheless, this example shows that people felt my presence as a racial outsider and potentially modified their language and actions accordingly.

On some surface level, then, I can forward a general idea of the influence of my presence. But perhaps this notion of accounting for the researcher’s presence misdirects our attention. The question of the research’s influence is really only significant in relation to what one is trying to know. And \textit{Hearing Faith} is not trying to make a case for what some idealized Faith Assembly would be like if it existed without the influence of my presence. The experiential facts of Faith Assembly’s existence are not dual: pure phenomena on the one hand, and phenomena plus observer on the other hand. I cannot smelt out pure phenomena, or refine away my presence. The knowledge that \textit{Hearing Faith}—and, I would venture to say, most recent ethnomusicology—is interested in is that which emerges from human interactions in which the researcher is ineluctably a part. Thus, the question for researchers is not how do we account for our presence as participants and observers, but how do we present an edifying account of particular intersubjective encounters in which all parties

involved are both participating and observing? The claims made in *Hearing Faith’s* subsequent chapters are driven by that question.

My thoroughly intertwined roles as researcher and participant at Faith Assembly did present some practical challenges. Though I discussed my research project at length with Faith Assembly’s founders and leaders, Bishop Leroy and Pastor Mary McKenzie, they rarely spoke to me—even in formal interviews—in ways that acknowledged my role and identity as “researcher.” To a large extent this was because I had been affiliated with the church for eight years before I began explicitly working on dissertation research. My relationship with the McKenzies was already well-established and our interactions traced well-worn grooves. With Bishop McKenzie in particular, conversations that began as attempts at academic interviews quickly shifted to discussions about the effectiveness of the church’s music ministry and about strategies for taking the church to “the next level,” as he very often phrased it. McKenzie was a leader; it was his job. He simply did not approach social interaction any other way. All of my life I have been more inclined to listen than to talk. When I tried to lead the conversation, everything felt out of whack until our roles switched. Invariably, I would eventually cede control of our conversations to McKenzie and then let them develop as they may. Even if I didn’t get specific answers to my questions, I came to recognize that our conversations were an invaluable part of my research process; part of what anthropologist Michael Jackson describes as “sharing experience, comparing notes, exchanging ideas, and finding common ground.”61 But I only recognized that value reflectively, in the course of looking back and drawing connections between a diverse range of research experiences. In the moment of conversation, however, my role rarely felt like

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“researcher.” Bishop McKenzie talked to me as a church member, musician, co-strategist, and friend.

Another challenge resulted from occupying a position that led my consultants to assume I already possessed knowledge that I, in fact, hoped to learn from them. Because I had two music degrees, some musically-inclined churchgoers were incredulous when I asked them questions, whether about specifics of musical technique or broader connections between music and experience or music and liturgy. I became accustomed to looks suggesting, “Don’t you already know that?” One of my initial research strategies was to seek private instruction from more experienced gospel musicians in order to get a clearer idea of the role they believed musicians played in worship settings, and what they emphasized as most important for successfully carrying out that role. But instruction relies on a power imbalance willingly entered into by both parties, and some of the musicians that I asked to work with me were skeptical. In the social and cultural environment of black pentecostal churches, the notion that someone with my academic credentials would willingly enter into such an imbalance seemed suspect. At one church in Houston, Texas where I had attended services, several band rehearsals, and conducted interviews with the music director, I asked the guitarist—a particularly skilled player—if we could schedule a lesson. He looked at me with a mixture of surprise and indignation. He had told me in a previous conversation that he had recently begun course work toward a music degree. “Don’t you already have a degree, man?” he asked rhetorically. “You’re the one about to get a PhD. Maybe you should give me a lesson.” I said that I had an undergraduate degree in classical guitar performance and that my current program was not performance-based. I explained that my gospel chops still
needed a lot of work, and I would pay him the going rate for an hour of instruction. He equivocated. We exchanged phone numbers and a few calls, but the lesson never happened.

It was not simply my possession of academic degrees that conflicted with my requests for instruction. To some extent, such requests flew in the face of the community’s normal modes of transmission. Among those African American pentecostals with whom I have been associated, the transmission of musical knowledge usually assumes the structure of apprenticeship. A less experienced musician who demonstrates an interest and an ear will “sit under” a more experienced one. The apprentice may occasionally request advice or explanation of a particular passage, but by-and-large is expected to simply learn through participation. At any given stage in a person’s musical development, what one cannot “catch” by ear is assumed to be beyond one’s capacity. If lessons occur, they frequently take the form of demonstrations or “jam and shed” sessions. Thus, it was not only that I had degrees that provoked suspicion at my requests for instruction, but also that I was potentially using these credentials to ask for “special favors,” or to somehow undermine the community’s tacitly agreed upon terms of engagement for musicians.

One more instance will serve to illustrate the practical challenges associated with my intertwined roles as an academic and a church musician. When the music department at Faith Assembly was going through a transitional phase, Bishop Leroy McKenzie asked me to take over the role of minister of music; a position which involved, among many other tasks, training singers and teaching vocal parts. I explained to McKenzie that I was not a singer and had no experience whatsoever with this kind of instruction. I simply did not have the ability to accomplish what the position required. Besides, I said, the job would conflict with my position as a researcher. My role at Faith Assembly as I understood it was to learn rather than
to lead. “But you were a music major,” McKenzie protested vehemently, “You’re getting a doctorate for God’s sake, Will.” I continued trying to make my case, but McKenzie stood by his position, claiming that God was “calling me higher” and that the Holy Spirit would “come in” to overcome whatever obstacles might exist. Despite my insistence that I could not take the position, McKenzie went as far as announcing in front of the congregation on the following Sunday morning that he was going to put me “over the music department,” hoping—in contemporary pentecostal parlance—“to speak into existence” my acceptance of the position. Only after another plea on my part following that service did he finally back down.

Working through these kinds of challenges led me to seek models that could guide my research and writing. The work of folklorist and anthropologist Glenn Hinson and ethnomusicologist Melvin Butler was particularly helpful, and a comparison of their respective scholarship helps clarify my own position as a researcher and participant. Hinson’s work focuses on black Sanctified Christians in the American South, and Butler’s focuses on black Pentecostals in Jamaica, Haiti, and New York. In addition to their similar subject matter, both scholars share a fundamental commitment to accepting the ontological realities of their consultants and refusing to “explain away” the transcendent experiential encounters of believers.

But there are important differences between the two scholars. Hinson is white and does not discuss his religious beliefs in his work. Butler is black and writes openly about his Pentecostal faith. A primary concern of Hinson’s is to write against the long tradition of

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62. “Sanctified” is a term long used by African Americans to refer to all those believers who are “saved, sanctified, and filled with the Holy Ghost.” The category encompasses those who are part of Pentecostal and Holiness denominations, but also a range of believers who value ecstatic worship and a lifestyle of holiness but attend mainline or non-denominational churches. The term will be discussed further in the next chapter.
scholars who were unrepentantly willing to destroy “experience to consolidate [their] disciplines and advance [their] careers.”

He calls for ethnographers to adopt “a stance of radical objectivity while reframing analysis in the ontological terms of the faithful.”

Butler, though he shares the “ontological terms of the faithful,” is not fundamentally concerned that analysis be framed in these terms. He embraces as “useful and edifying” the “ongoing process of learning to accept certain epistemological tensions” that result from reconciling “religious faith with the exigencies of academic education.”

In contrast, Hinson’s 2000 monograph *Fire in My Bones* excises quotations of scholars from the body of his text altogether.

Only his own words, those of his consultants, and passages from the Bible appear in the book’s chapters; any discussions of academic perspectives are relegated to the endnotes.

To sum up their differences in terms of the sources of authority they recognize:

for Hinson, only the ontological terms of believers are the basis for his analytical framework;

for Butler, the terms of believers and non-believers mingle on the same analytical stratum.

Their different opinions on scholarly authority are fundamentally connected to their differences in “stance” and “identity.”

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63 Folklorist Henry Glassie (one of Hinson’s teachers) states forcefully in his classic *Passing the Time in Ballymenone: Culture and History of an Ulster Community* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982) that “We must have some higher calling than destroying experience to consolidate our disciplines and advance our careers.”


66 Glenn Hinson, *Fire in my Bones*.

67 Though “relegated” in terms of placement, Hinson’s endnotes include much more than requisite citations and incidental ideas. In fact, *Fire in my Bones* reads almost like two separate books, with the body of the text engaging in the discursive world of the saints of the African American gospel church, and the endnotes engaging in the discursive world of the academy.

declares both his stance and identity to be “ethnographer,” and ethnographer only. He never discusses the details of his own religious commitments, but suggests in the first paragraph of *Fire in My Bones* that his consultants speak to him as “one whose soul is yet unsaved.”\(^69\) In relating a conversation with a church elder, Hinson’s book begins with an image of clear separation that sets the tone for the entire work: “He, a Primitive Baptist elder and a singer of deep intensity, sits on one side of a small kitchen table. I, a folklorist seeking understanding of a power often witnessed and sometimes felt, sit on the other.”\(^70\) The persona that Hinson presents in his writing is that of an outsider on a “quest for phenomenological understanding.”\(^71\) He seeks to present “the(ir) lived logic of sanctified meaning” as accurately as possible, never allowing “the urge to explain [to overrule] the desire to learn.”\(^72\)

Butler saw himself and was recognized by his consultants as both ethnographer and co-participant. His stance and identity were irreducibly dual. Although there were many cultural differences between him and his Caribbean consultants, he writes that while “worshiping and making musical praise with Jamaican and Haitian churchgoers, fieldwork sometimes became indistinguishable from ‘homework’.”\(^73\) In contrast to Hinson’s image of the dividing kitchen table, Butler’s writing suggests that his exchanges with consultants were more dialogic. His quest was less about phenomenological understanding—something that he already possessed, at least in part, as a Holy Ghost baptized Pentecostal—and more about understanding how the practice of Pentecostalism intersected with broader sociocultural and

\(^{69}\)Hinson, *Fire in My Bones*, 1.

\(^{70}\)Ibid.

\(^{71}\)Ibid., 17.

\(^{72}\)Ibid., 325, 323.

\(^{73}\)Melvin Butler, “Songs of Pentecost,” 27.
transnational dynamics. Additionally, Butler was seeking experiences that would help him “grow spiritually” as a believer. Referring to his conversations with Jamaican pastor Hermine Bryant, Butler writes, “While I realized that our discussions would contribute greatly to my dissertation project, it was as much my desire to grow spiritually that compelled me to continue listening and learning.”74

In the final analysis, it is beliefs about what ethnography can and should do that separate the two scholars. Hinson seems fundamentally concerned with ethnography capturing and presenting—as accurately as possible—the locally-, culturally-, and religiously-specific contours of experience. Butler seems fundamentally concerned with using ethnography as means through which to address academic conversations about religious, national, and cultural identity; and, at the same time, as a life experience through which he might be strengthened in his faith and be a “blessing” to the “people of God.”75

The work of Hinson and Butler serves as a crucial guide for Hearing Faith, but ultimately my approach is situated between that of these two scholars. I was too much of an insider to take Hinson’s approach and too much of an outsider to take Butler’s. I have been at Faith Assembly for longer than any musician in the church’s 20-year history; it has been my “church home” for over a decade and my relationship with the people there is one of family. If an ethnomusicologist showed up next Sunday to begin a project on Faith Assembly, I would likely be one of her core consultants. Thus, in the course of my research I have never experienced anything comparable to Hinson’s image of the kitchen table—a clear divide between scholar and consultant. At the same time, unlike Butler who claimed that his fieldwork was not necessarily separable from “everyday life,” there remains for me a

74Ibid., 119.
75Ibid., 350-354.
separation between my participation in African American pentecostalism and the “rest of my life.” The force of cultural and racial difference persists such that I have not achieved a full integration in my own life—just as the religious landscape in the United States in general has not achieved such integration. My church friends and graduate school friends, for example, remain two distinct entities.

Because my research was characterized by both a powerful closeness with church members and an ineradicable distance, I came to realize that neither one nor the other could stand as the foundation for Hearing Faith’s authorial voice. In the end, the claims that this dissertation makes are driven neither by the kind of rigorously collaborative process that ensured Hinson’s accurate-as-possible representation of an ontological reality different than his own, nor, as in Butler’s case, by a fundamental desire to be a better pentecostal. They are driven instead by the sense that my time at Faith Assembly has been—to borrow a metaphor from Michael Jackson—“a laboratory in which I happened to explore the human condition with focus and discipline.” Hearing Faith is ultimately less concerned with “elucidating a unique lifeworld or foreign worldview” than with showing how one community uses musical practice to negotiate the struggles of existence—the problem of free will, for example, or the certainty of loss, or the seeming absurdity of levity’s presence within moments of gravity. This approach works to recover the humanity that is often lost in scholarly conversations about black churches. Rather than focusing on the extent to which some group of believers measures up to an a priori notion of “conservative,” “progressive,” “priestly,” or “prophetic,”

76 Butler, “Songs of Pentecost,” 351

77 Michael Jackson, Lifeworlds: Essays in Existential Anthropology (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 28. Jackson follows this quotation with, “A cynic might say that what I found [during my fieldwork in Sierra Leone] was little more than a projection of myself, but Sierra Leone transformed me, shaping the person I now am and the anthropology I now do.” This resonates with my experience at Faith Assembly.

78 Ibid.
it focuses on how believers use music to help make their way through life. If there is a battle that drives *Hearing Faith*’s narrative, it is not the battle between Rev. Ike and Dr. King—as Eddie Glaude has provocatively characterized the tensions in contemporary African American churches—but the battle to exist better; a battle in which the entire continuum of African American Christians is engaged.\textsuperscript{79}

**Methods**

In general, this dissertation’s research methods are those of ethnomusicology: participant observation, interviews and conversation, and documentation (in addition to taking fieldnotes, I made hundreds of hours of audio recordings of services and rehearsals, and I also utilized video recordings made by Faith Assembly’s Audio/Visual personnel). In addition to these processes and materials, there are several methodological considerations that are distinctive to *Hearing Faith*. These include: the physical location from which I conducted much of my research—the band pit; the dissertation’s use of a case study approach that focuses in detail on relatively short moments of single worship services; my training as a musicologist (rather than an ethnographer); and a particular philosophical orientation—drawing especially from the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, William James, and Michael Jackson—that forms an underlying intellectual foundation to the work.

*The Band Pit as Home Base*

*Hearing Faith*’s methods—in terms of research and writing—are intimately connected to my participating in and observing services at Faith Assembly from the band pit.

\textsuperscript{79} Rev. Ike was a prominent televangelist who taught that believers could transcend the world’s limitations and live lives of supernatural prosperity. The potential for such transcendence, according to Rev. Ike, rendered engaged social and political action irrelevant. See Glaude’s comment at 49:20 on the video of the 2010 Columbia roundtable on the future of black churches: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7r8Djfxu1Bk. On Rev. Ike see Chapter 2 in Jonathan Walton, *Watch This! The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 47-74.
Figure I.1 is a not-to-scale diagram showing the position of the band pit in Faith Assembly’s sanctuary.

**Figure I.1 – Faith Assembly’s Sanctuary**

![Diagram of Faith Assembly’s Sanctuary]

This dissertation presents moments of musical practice at Faith Assembly from the vantage point of the band pit where I spent the vast majority of my time in the church. Sitting with the band in the space of the sanctuary, I was *not*: 1) part of the congregation, 2) elevated on stage (like the singers or the preacher), or 3) able to view the congregation without them viewing me (as the sound engineer can). I was on the same level as the congregation, looking toward them, just as they were looking toward me. From this position, I was keenly aware of the facial expressions and bodily comportment of those in the congregation, but at the same time I was always separated from them, not only spatially but also by the physical barrier of the partition that marked the band pit. In other words, I often felt more like an observer than a participant. In the relentlessly participatory environment of African American pentecostal worship, I frequently watched with guitar in hand, or took notes, while those in the congregation carried out the MC’s or the preacher’s directives to “turn to your neighbor and
say ‘amen,’’ or “find three people to hug and tell them you love them,” or “lock hands with somebody and begin to pray.”

But while I was separated, I was not merely an onlooker. I was actively participating in music making throughout each service, not only accompanying singers, but also playing behind prayers, heightened moments of preaching, outbreaks of Holy Dancing, and altar calls. In fact, some of the most enlightening communicative exchanges that occurred during the course of my research were musical: locking in with other musicians during a rehearsal, trading licks with Bishop McKenzie as he chanted during the climax of a sermon, or becoming aware that the movements of a worshiper dancing in Spirit-filled ecstasy were synchronized with my guitar playing. In such moments I experienced powerful interpersonal connections greater than the sum of their parts, and from these flowed multi-faceted understandings, more finely-textured, if less articulable, than anything I achieved through verbal dialogue alone. These experiences actually lead me to question Michael Jackson’s comments about the “oxymoronic nature of the so-called participant observation methodology.” He claims that “In practice one can observe and participate successively but not simultaneously.” Technically this may be true if one is referring solely to a rational intellectually-engaged frame of consciousness. Very often at Faith Assembly, however, my conscious mind would be operating in an analytical/observational mode—noting patterns or comparing what was happening in the present to what I had observed in the past—while muscle memory allowed my fingers on the fretboard to continue participating in the service.

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80I will explain the structure of services and these various moments of music making in the following chapter.


82Ibid.
Many crucial insights in the course of my research occurred during moments in which I was simultaneously a participant and an observer.

The band pit also functioned as a hub for informal conversation. After Sunday morning services I would hang around the band pit, often for an hour or more, chatting with fellow musicians, members of the Praise Team, or other church members. These conversations were not structured academic interviews, but they were essential to the research process. Frequently, we reflected on and evaluated the preceding worship service, noting moments of music and dance that were particularly “anointed” and others that were perhaps not as effective. It was during these hours of “hanging out” that I came to more clearly understand what my fellow musicians and churchgoers valued in musical practice, and how they thought it was best achieved.

*Case Study Approach*

Chapter 1 takes a broad view of Faith Assembly, situating it in an historical and religious context and uncovering the shared worldview that holds a collection of individuals together as an institution. Chapters 2 and 3, which focus respectively on sound and dance, utilize a close-focused lens. Each of these two chapters deal with three case studies, and each case study is a detailed exploration of a single moment or event in a worship service (ranging from about one minute to around half-an-hour). This approach is an attempt to show the details of the experiential texture of worship. Zooming in on this kind of detail is important because it honors the community’s focus on the experience of “having church”—not just going to church, but *having* church. It is only through having church, believers declare, “the ultimate purposes of worship [can be] fulfilled.”

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In what remains one of the most insightful works on African American pentecostalism, theologian Cheryl Sanders notes that having church can only occur when there is an alignment between “three indispensable components: a ministering actor or artist, a responsive audience, and a spiritual anointing of divine manifestation or presence.”\textsuperscript{84} When these work in concert, believers “have church,” using “song, speech, and dance” as part of a “rich epistemology” of “knowing God and verifying spiritual revelation.”\textsuperscript{85} For African American pentecostals, church is not church without certain experiential goals being met. Scholarly conversations about black pentecostal churches that ignore the phenomenological textures of “having church” miss something crucial, and they often overemphasize elements of church life—details of doctrine, theology, or particular comments made in sermons, for example—that may be given very little weight by church members themselves. Moreover, such scholarly treatments also miss the fact that when churchgoers speak of “having church” they do not refer merely to a nebulous wash of experience, but a phenomenon that: 1) covers a range of experiential modes (from silent and meditative to loud and ecstatic), 2) requires practice and the careful cultivation of spiritual and biblical knowledge, and 3) requires the development and refinement of nuanced interpretative mechanisms to distinguish between human emotional and Spirit-filled experiences.\textsuperscript{86} \textit{Hearing Faith’s} case study approach is an attempt to capture, to some extent, the details of communal experience that constitute having church as it emerges in its various modes.

While this utilization of detailed case studies is inspired by the values of the Faith Assembly community, it also means that a significant percentage of this dissertation is

\textsuperscript{84}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{85}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{86}This third point is discussed extensively by Glenn Hinson in \textit{Fire in My Bones}. See, for example, pp. 19-24.
devoted to discussion of a mere six moments out of hundreds of possibilities. I selected these moments because, in living through them, they presented themselves as both representative—in the sense that similar moments occurred quite often—and extraordinary—in the sense that specific recent events, or particular confluences promised a greater-than-average wealth of analytical insight. It is important for me to stress, however, that I selected these moments—I did not put it up for a vote to the congregation—and I cannot claim that the majority of members would have selected the same six. Ultimately, though, I believe that the case studies presented in Chapters 2 and 3, when read against the broader backdrop presented in Chapter 1, offer a richly textured portrayal of worship at Faith Assembly and the ways in which believers negotiate existential and religious challenges through musical practice.

A Trained Musicologist doing Ethnomusicology

Hearing Faith is the work of one trained as a musicologist and driven to do field-based research. While the project is thoroughly grounded in immersive experience with the community, conversations with members, and direct participation, it inevitably reflects the fact that much of my analytical training has been focused on reading texts—musical scores, audio and video recordings, musical occasions, and so on. Although all the analyses I present are deeply informed by dialogue with community members and embodied knowledge of being a church musician, I have not double-checked all of my interpretive claims with churchgoers as a scholar working in a fully collaborative mode of ethnography would likely do. Moreover, in places, I offer thoughts about music-making and dance that are aimed at

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87 Furthermore, while the idea that a moment could be both representative and extraordinary seems contradictory by the standards of much academic discourse, in the milieu of pentecostal worship this duality of experience is quite common. Theologian James K.A. Smith writes that, “for pentecostals, the unexpected is expected. The surprising comes as no surprise.” Smith, Thinking in Tongues, 33.
revealing potential meanings which I cannot necessarily claim are those that the majority of Faith Assembly’s members would most readily recognize or feel a need to put into words. The aim of this analytical move, however, is to point out particular issues or ideas that may work to bridge pentecostal and academic discourse, and, more broadly, may challenge a wide range of people to reexamine presuppositions or attempt a new point of view.

*Phenomenology, Pragmatism, and Existential Anthropology*

Like most contemporary musicology and ethnomusicology, *Hearing Faith* is informed by a range of interdisciplinary scholarship. But while I draw on work from theology and African American studies, for example, to inform particular claims, there are a few core philosophical commitments that undergird the entirety of the dissertation. Often operating beneath the surface, the following schools of thought impart a kind of intellectual disposition to the work. Phenomenology—especially exemplified by the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty—guides the present project with its insistence on the primacy of embodied experience in our meaning-making and knowledge creating endeavors. For Merleau-Ponty “Our own body is in the world as the heart is in the organism: it keeps the visible spectacle constantly alive, it breathes life into it and sustains it inwardly, and with it forms a system.”

Moreover, he conceived of scholarly endeavors like philosophy and anthropology simply as instantiations of the embodied process of “bringing truth into being,” not as above, but “lateral” to other embodied endeavors. In an environment like Faith Assembly where touch, dance, and gesture are pervasive, the body powerfully presents itself as a site of knowing.

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Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology helps reveal the ways in which this kind of embodied knowledge and the scholarly project of *Hearing Faith* can be in a productive dialogue.

The writings of William James—the author who first lay claim to a philosophical school known as pragmatism—also undergird the present work. James insisted that “The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events.” Following James, then, the goal of a project like *Hearing Faith* is not to uncover foundational truths from which experiences arise, but to explore the process of truth-making; to ask why, within particular cultural, social, historical, and religious circumstances do some ideas show themselves to be more *useful*, or more true? (In James’ pragmatism usefulness and truth are closely correlated). Such an approach avoids what James calls the “sentimentalist fallacy,” the tendency “to shed tears over abstract justice and generosity, beauty, etc., and never to know these qualities when you meet them in the street, because there the circumstances make them vulgar.” Something like this fallacy has been common in the discourse around contemporary black churches, where scholars have consistently decried the lack of prophetic voices on the national stage, but given very little attention to the many activities and practices that edify and empower local communities in churches across the country. By exploring processes of truth-making within the musical practices of one church, *Hearing Faith* offers a James-inspired perspective to this discourse.

Finally, the existential anthropology of Michael Jackson—the New Zealander anthropologist who teaches at Harvard Divinity School—has been a constant presence in the creation of *Hearing Faith*. Jackson is interested in dynamic relationships—between people,

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between people and ideas, between people and material things, and so on—rather than fixed properties or concepts (such as identity or culture). “[The] focus of existential anthropology,” writes Jackson, “is the paradox of plurality and the ambiguity of intersubjective life.

Although we exist as both singular beings and participants in wider fields of being that encompass other people, material things, and abstractions, our relations with ourselves and with others are uncertain, constantly changing, and subject to endless negotiation.”\(^{92}\) It is this process of intersubjective negotiation that *Hearing Faith* seeks to explore through Faith Assembly’s musical practices.

I have been drawn to these three related schools of thought not only because I find them intellectually edifying but also because elements of Faith Assembly’s discourse and practice often parallel the claims of these writers in interesting ways.\(^{93}\) For example, Pastor Mary McKenzie has on several occasions explained the practice of speaking in tongues—a practice that has been cloaked in doctrinal strictures by scores of pentecostal clergy and scholars of pentecostalism—with a James-like pragmatic air. “The purpose is not for you to speak in tongues,” she preached in February of 2013,

The purpose is for you to be able to empower yourself to *do*; and to hear from God. When you speak in tongues it reminds you that the Holy Spirit is in you…It reminds you that you are not in this life by yourself…We just don’t walk around speaking in tongues so you’ll think we’re religious. *Religious* people don’t speak in tongues. People that…need to hear from God speak in tongues. Why? Because I need some help with this weakness! I’m going through something right now and I don’t understand it. God’s not telling me anything about it, so I need the Holy Spirit to reveal what’s going on.\(^{94}\)

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\(^{93}\)These parallels are present despite fundamental ontological disagreements. These three scholarly traditions generally reject the notion of universal truth while Faith Assembly’s religious tradition is, of course, built on the notion of the universal truth of a monotheistic Christian God.

\(^{94}\)Pastor Mary McKenzie, FACC, February 3, 2013.
Similarly, Bishop Leroy McKenzie repeatedly claimed—in a rhetorical move reminiscent of Michael Jackson’s insistence on the importance of intersubjectivity—that believers must focus on “relationship” (to God and others) rather than “religiosity” (i.e., the performance of religion). McKenzie often suggested that practicing worship is important precisely because “our relations with ourselves and with others are uncertain, constantly changing, and subject to endless negotiation.”95 Thus, I draw on ideas from phenomenology, pragmatism, and existential anthropology throughout *Hearing Faith* because they both parallel and shed light on key concepts at Faith Assembly, and they help reveal facets of contemporary African American pentecostal worship that have been overlooked in much of the extant scholarly discourse.

**Scholarship on Black Gospel Music**

The schools of thought outlined above form the core intellectual commitments of *Hearing Faith*, and their central ideas will reappear throughout the dissertation. There is another body of scholarship, however, that this work is deeply indebted to, even if it less prominently exposed in the pages that follow. This is the collection of scholarship on the topic of black gospel music, which has only emerged since the 1970s.

Much early scholarship on black gospel music was characterized by what leading gospel scholars Portia Maultsby and Mellonee Burnim call a “preoccupation with defining gospel in opposition to Western European music, or producing trait lists believed to define meaning.”96 In the 1980s scholars began to move away from these essentializing tendencies

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95 McKenzie would have likely claimed that the Christian’s relationship with God is also constantly changing; ideally as part of a continuing “spiritual growth.”

96 Mellonee Burnim and Portia Maultsby, *African American Music: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2006). Although very little was written about black gospel music until the 1970s, there were a few earlier works including Richard A. Waterman, “Gospel Hymns of a Negro Church in Chicago,” *Journal of the International Folk Music Council* (1951), 87-93; and George Robinson Ricks, “Some Aspects of the Religious Music of the
to include ethnographic studies of specific congregations, studies focused on denomination, and detailed accounts of particular performance traditions within the genre, such as quartet singing. In accordance with a general increase in scholarship on popular music topics, the amount of work on gospel grew significantly in the 1990s. Books were published giving biographical and critical attention to pioneering figures in gospel’s history. Other scholarship discussed the connections between gospel and popular secular music, the performance of spiritual and regional identities, and, emphasized, for the first time, the importance of gospel “announcers” and gospel stage plays.

In the last decade, Guthrey Ramsey’s work brought new critical insights into the study of gospel music through the application of theoretical perspectives adapted from literary criticism such as Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s concept of Signifyin(g) and Albert Murray’s idea of “technologies of stylization” within black performance. Such theoretical perspectives bespeak a larger concern with power relationships, a topic taken up at length in


the deeply insightful work of musicologist and activist Georgiary McElveen. Based on research in the archives of a St. Louis gospel music community center, McElveen examines African American gospel as a form of social and economic empowerment that extends well beyond church walls.\textsuperscript{101} Phenomenological methods have also been employed by scholars with disciplinary backgrounds in anthropology, ethnomusicology, and sociology in order to explore the relationships between spiritual experience, faith, and belief for gospel participants.\textsuperscript{102} Scholars such as cultural theorist Angela Nelson and activist/scholar Melinda Weekes have explored secularization and racial, class, and generational integration as key themes that characterize the relationships between contemporary gospel and popular culture.\textsuperscript{103} This work, along with that from ethnomusicologists such as Melvin Butler and Birgitta Johnson, has been at the forefront of investigating the shifting relationships between music, cultural identity, and the church, especially as it relates to the late 20\textsuperscript{th} century growth of the African American middle class.\textsuperscript{104}

There is also an emerging frontier of black gospel music research which coheres around issues of gender and sexuality. While most African American churches remain socially conservative, scholars, journalists, and people inside the community are increasingly talking more openly about the large homosexual population inside African American


\textsuperscript{103} Angela Nelson, “Why We Sing: The Role and Meaning if Gospel in African American Popular Culture,” in \textit{The triumph of the Soul: Cultural and Psychological Aspects of African American music}, \textit{edited by Ferdinand Jones and Arthur C. Jones} (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001); Melinda Weekes, “This House, This Music.”

churches and within gospel music.\textsuperscript{105} Promising work by young scholars including Ashon Crawley and Alisha Lola Jones explores the challenges to heteronormativity embedded in gospel music performance and black pentecostal worship.\textsuperscript{106} Crawley’s work employs cultural theory in arguing that the history of pentecostal practice is “an a theological-a philosophical project, produced against the grain of liberal logics of subjectivity.”\textsuperscript{107} In this sense, his thesis has fundamental similarities with that which shapes the body of \textit{Hearing Faith}, where I conceive of musical practice not as an articulation of belief or theology, but as a process through which worshipers work through challenges and uncertainties, and strive to maximize well-being.

\textbf{Chapter Summaries}

Chapter 1 provides background information about Faith Assembly Christian Center and situates the church in an historical and theological context. It also outlines what I call the “Spirit-filled imagination,” a way of being that is not necessarily theological or doctrinal, but is continually operating in Faith Assembly’s worship practices. The Spirit-filled imagination is a central concept for \textit{Hearing Faith} and is at the heart of the processes of negotiation discussed in Chapters 2 and 3.

Sound is the conceptual core of Chapter 2. Musical practice at Faith Assembly, and indeed at most African American pentecostal churches, is characterized by a broad sonic


\textsuperscript{107}Ibid., ii.
continuum stretching from silence to physically painful noise. The communicative nuance which emerges along this continuum is sometimes lost in studies that conceive of musical practice primarily as the performance of particular *songs*. While the songs sung at Faith Assembly are discussed in this chapter (and elsewhere in the dissertation), its case studies are more concerned with the sounds of “extra-repertoire” music making. These include reprises, spontaneously composed songs, musically-accompanied prayers and exhortations, and a range of improvised or semi-improvised sounds. The case studies examine how these sounds, 1) embody or *perform* key concepts, creating an holistic understanding that surpasses the merely intellectual, 2) help believers negotiate apparent contradictions that characterize their religious belief and practices, such as the presence of levity in moments of gravity, and 3) help believers negotiate the relationship between past and present in a way in which words alone cannot.

Chapter 3 explores dance at Faith Assembly, where—as at most pentecostal churches—bodily movement is an essential element of music making. African American pentecostal worship is characterized by a great range of physical gesture including several different kinds of dance. This chapter focuses specifically on choreographed dance which has been largely ignored in scholarly accounts despite the fact that in the past three decades it has been embraced as an important worship practice by millions of African American Christians. Each case study explores a particular dance and how it participates in believers’ negotiation of an existential challenge—the problem of free will; the search for material abundance in a world characterized by lack and inequality; and the task of living life in the inescapable presence of a loved one who is dying.
Hearing Faith’s conclusion returns to the idea of the Sprit-filled imagination, reiterating the ways in which this base of knowledge and mode of being complicates simple binaries between the priestly and the prophetic, the spiritual and the practical. Drawing from the arguments forwarded in the preceding chapters, the conclusion considers some ways in which “ground level” African American churchgoers and the academics who study them are engaged in similar pursuits, both driven ultimately by a desire to maximize well-being for African American individuals and communities.

Ultimately, Hearing Faith is an exploration of the power and complexity of musical practice in contemporary African American Spirit-filled worship. This exploration is necessary because practitioners of this worship are frequently the subject of major national debates—like the one sparked by Eddie Glaude’s “The Black Church is Dead.” As the subject of these conversations, African American believers often have their subjectivity defined for them. And, intentionally or unintentionally, this defining of subjectivity often carries with it an implicit denial of agency. Hearing Faith does not attempt to define Spirit-filled Christians as subjects, but simply delves into the fraught territory of the contemporary church to show how people claim and exercise agency within this environment. It models an approach that can be used to help us better account for and understand the complexities of African American church practice both now and in the past.
CHAPTER 1: THEOLOGY, LITURGY, AND THE SPIRIT-FILLED IMAGINATION

Each March when Faith Assembly Christian Center in Durham, North Carolina, celebrates the anniversary of its founding, Pastor Garry Mitchell—acting as Master of Ceremonies (MC) for the service—reads the church’s creation story before the congregation; an act he performs with panache. The narrative—with its weighty, quasi-biblical, yet simultaneously lighthearted rhetoric—encapsulates the church’s key values and approach to worship. At the same time it reaffirms for church members both their history and their belief that the community is divinely-ordained. Here is an excerpt transcribed from Pastor Garry’s reading on March 6, 2011:

The first church service was held at temporary quarters—the Residential Inn in Durham, North Carolina—where we remained until December the 31st of 1994. During the first months of the ministry, Dr. McKenzie knew, in order to grow, there had to be a place that would hold a multitude of people that God had placed in his spirit. He was then led by God to 3120 Fayetteville Street. At the time, the place was without form and void, and darkness was upon the walls and the ceilings. Then God directed Dr. McKenzie to find 110 gallons of paint, and God said, “Let there be light” (loud applause). As the walls were painted by the hands of the children and adults, the church started to light up, and God said the light was good. And Faith Assembly Christian Center was established. Then God said let the chairs bring forth the people, and let the doors be opened. Then God created Bishop, man of his establishment, and God blessed him. Then God said to him, “be fruitful and multiply, and replenish my church, and subdue the nation, for I have appointed you to preach the gospel in season, out of season, reprove, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and doctrine.” And the spirit of the Lord was upon him and God anointed him to preach the gospel to the poor and to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recover the spiritual sight to the blind. God had given him what he needed to change a generation. God said it is not good for Bishop to be alone. Hmmm. I will make him a Pastor. And God formed Pastor Mary D. McKenzie (loud applause and cheers)—prophetess, teacher. In July of 1995 she was licensed, ordained, and appointed Co-Pastor on the same day (more applause). Since then, she has been elevated to Pastor.
Bishop said “this is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh, she will be called Pastor Mary D. McKenzie.” And they didn’t have much, but they were not ashamed.

The practice of reading one’s own history through the lens of the Bible is common among fundamentalist and evangelical Christians. Faith Assembly’s creation story provides a means through which churchgoers read themselves—and, especially, their founder, Bishop Leroy McKenzie—into several different scriptures. Lines 5-13 are based on the Genesis creation story; lines 13-14 quote the New Testament instructions (2 Timothy 4:2) regarding what a “man of God” should do; lines 16-18 reference Jesus’ claimed calling in Luke 4:18; and lines 18-23 are based on the Genesis account of Adam and Eve. By presenting their own history in this manner, Faith Assembly makes a claim on their spiritual legitimacy, a crucial move for an independent non-denominational church that cannot turn toward institutional hierarchy for the conferral of authority. But this is also more than a legitimizing story. Intertwined with the biblically-infused telling of their history are key themes of what this chapter identifies as the “Spirit-filled imagination”—an underlying base of intellectual and embodied knowledge that fundamentally shapes the practices and goals of contemporary African American Spirit-filled worship. At least three of the seven constitutive elements of the Spirit-filled imagination that this chapter will discuss figure prominently in Faith Assembly’s creation narrative: destiny, faith, and transformation. The story suggests that Faith Assembly’s existence is but the manifestation of a preordained destiny with claims that God “led” (line 5), “directed” (7), instructed (10-16), and provided for (17-18) McKenzie. Faith is highlighted through the order in which the narrative presents information; even before McKenzie was named Bishop (11-12) and “anointed to preach the gospel to the poor…” (16), he had already begun the first services (1), acquired and remodeled a building (5-9), and “established” the church (10). The suggestion is that McKenzie had enough faith
to work for God even before he had received a divine seal of approval through God’s conferral of a title and an anointing. Transformation is emphasized through the telling of how the solidly black interior of the building was repainted and “started to light up” (9). Though it was not explicitly stated in the story, Faith Assembly’s members know that their church building is a former nightclub, which imparts even greater heft to the significance of this transformative painting.

This chapter situates Faith Assembly in a historical and theological context and lays out the concept of the Spirit-filled imagination. Despite the fact that the church is only two decades old and developed primarily according to the vision of Bishop Leroy McKenzie, independent from denominational hierarchy, its beliefs and practices have been powerfully influenced by established theological, doctrinal, and denominational strands; especially the intertwined phenomena of 1) black pentecostalism, and 2) what theologian Jonathan Walton has termed the “black electronic church”—which consists of televangelists “and the organizations from which these persons develop, package, and promote the many ministry related products, i.e. audio and videotapes, books, and conference tours,” as well as megachurches that model themselves on these televised ministries. Ultimately, however, rather than defining Faith Assembly as a religious institution, these influences are absorbed into a constellation of practices, beliefs, values, and shared understandings that I call the

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1While this notion of faith is indeed one that is emphasized by believers at Faith Assembly (and is even written into the name of the church), it is also important to note that believers generally recognize that the title and the anointing were already there, part of God’s divine plan for McKenzie and Faith Assembly. McKenzie’s faith did not make these appear, but was instead a key element of his “walking out” of what he sees as God’s plan for his life.

2I have already briefly explained the use of small-p pentecostal in the Introduction and will say a bit more about it below.

Spirit-filled imagination. My articulation of the Spirit-filled imagination will underlie the arguments in each of the subsequent chapters in *Hearing Faith*. I discuss this imagination with reference to key concepts that will resonate widely with contemporary African American Christians. The specifics of my discussion, however, emerge from the local context of Faith Assembly.

**Faith Assembly Christian Center**

Faith Assembly is a predominantly African American church. Out of approximately 120 attendees each week, there are usually between one and three white people in attendance, including me. The church building is located about one mile southwest of the historically black North Carolina Central University and half-a-mile north of White Rock Baptist Church, where Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his “fill up the jails” speech in 1960, eight days after the famous Woolworth’s sit-ins in Greensboro, North Carolina. Durham is North Carolina’s fourth-largest city and has a roughly equal number of black and white citizens.

The city has figured prominently in the lives of many notable African Americans, including a

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number of musicians and nationally-known religious figures. One of Faith Assembly’s members, Minister Larry Duncan, was a member of a nationally touring soul group, The Modulations, in the 1970s. Their LP, *It’s Rough Out Here*, is still sought by 70s soul aficionados and has been sampled on recordings by hip-hop heavyweights including Common and Nas. Duncan, who appeared with the group on the television show *Soul Train* in the mid-70s, says that the black popular music scene was thriving in Durham during those years despite the fact that it never garnered national attention comparable to scenes in larger cities such as Philadelphia and Detroit. This rich popular music tradition in Durham has always been intertwined with music making in the city’s black churches. Minister Duncan embodies this fact as he once performed secular music in the very nightclub that has now been transformed into Faith Assembly Christian Center, where today he frequently sings sacred music on Sunday mornings.

In addition to this soul music legacy, Durham has birthed several black church celebrities. Two legends of gospel music, Shirley Caesar and John P. Kee, grew up in the city. Both still call North Carolina home and continue successful careers as pastors and gospel artists. The former regularly sings and preaches at the “Year End Revival” hosted by Faith Assembly each December. The controversial televangelist Bishop Eddie Long, a 1977 graduate of North Carolina Central University, also has strong ties to Durham.

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Faith Assembly’s founder, Bishop Leroy McKenzie, grew up in Durham and frequently claimed that he was called to ministry on the day that his 17 year-old nephew was murdered, a victim of the violent crime in Durham that ranks well above state and national averages. McKenzie always saw Faith Assembly, he told me in several conversations, as a response to problems in the community around him. Though he believed that God—or more specifically, the power of the Holy Spirit—was an essential ingredient in facilitating the kind of changes he hoped to see, McKenzie frequently claimed that being too “deep” or too “religious” could in fact hinder practical action. He told me that he believed the daycare and K-12 school, Faith Assembly Academy, run by the church were as essential to his vision as the worship services held there. Furthermore, McKenzie had a long-term goal of building a youth ranch for at-risk teenagers. McKenzie envisioned that this ranch could be a constructive, self-affirming, and skill-building alternative to incarceration. Faith Assembly has purchased 80 acres of land in Warren County, North Carolina and continues to work toward the goal of establishing this center.

In our conversations, McKenzie suggested that he saw Faith Assembly as a kind of Spirit-filled “base” from which Christians could respond to, and transform, the community around them. The kinds of action that he believed constituted this response were summarized in his “vision statement” for the church; what he called the “4 Es:”

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10McKenzie’s claim highlights another dialectic that must be negotiated by Spirit-filled believers; what might be simplistically summarized as that between spiritual and practical action. Traditionally, Pentecostal and Holiness believers embraced the adage “in the world but not of the world.” Contemporary pentecostals often push this line of thinking to claim that because they are in touch with the “higher things” of the Spirit, they can interact in the world more freely. This has ramifications for everything from the kinds of careers believers pursue, to the clothes they wear, and the entertainment they consume.
1. **Evangelism**: Fulfilling the Great Commission by bringing the gospel of Jesus Christ to those that are lost, the backslider, or anyone who has turned their hearts away from God.

2. **Education**: Educating the entire family based on the Word of God. Believing that learning never ceases.

3. **Empowerment**: Equipping people to defeat generational poverty, bondage, and curses. For people to know that God has already provided everything they need and know that there is more to life than just existing.

4. **Entrepreneurship**: Encouraging people to become self sufficient and successful by using their God given gifts and talents. To understand God gave believers His power and wisdom to be wealthy in all areas of their life.\(^{11}\)

Framing his vision for Faith Assembly as the “4 Es,” McKenzie echoed the rhetoric of corporate leadership training.\(^{12}\) The eschewing of traditional Christian creeds in favor of those with a business-world-ring is relatively common among contemporary African American church leaders who are inspired by the ministries—and corporate empires—built by televangelists such as TD Jakes.\(^{13}\) But even if the form of this vision statement is borrowed from the business world, much of its content is distinctly black pentecostal—its reference to “the lost,” and “the backslider,” for example, and its talk of “bondage” and “curses.” Thus, with their conflation of corporate- and pentecostal-speak, the 4 Es encapsulate the ways in which McKenzie believes that the church can, and should, address common problems facing the African American community.

Faith Assembly’s vision of spiritual and community betterment seems to appeal particularly to individuals who reside in what Jonathan Walton has called the “nebulous category between the working and middle class.”\(^{14}\) Such a broad characterization, however,

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\(^{11}\)“The 4 Es” as presented on Faith Assembly’s website: [www.facc-ministries.org](http://www.facc-ministries.org).

\(^{12}\)A Google search for “4 Es,” for example turns up web sites that outline the “4 Es of Leadership,” “4 Es of Marketing Strategy,” and “4 Es of an Excellent Leader.”

does not do justice to the range of individuals that make up the church. There are a few members who are owners of successful businesses and non-profits, and there is a contingent of middle class professionals. One of the “church mothers” (that is, older—usually over 65—stalwart female members) is a retired college music professor and opera singer who made a number of well-known recordings and toured internationally. Another is a large real estate owner in the area. Other regular attendees of the church, however, struggle with poverty—some of them living a week-to-week, or even day-to-day, existence. Faith Assembly is well-acquainted with the problems that currently face many segments of the African American community: unemployment, foreclosure, lack of savings or financial “safety nets,” substance abuse, health problems, and incarceration (especially for young black males).  

The members are fairly diverse in terms of age as well. There are a handful of church mothers and also a few older men. Men and women between 30 and 55 compose the majority of the adult membership. There is, however, an almost equally large presence of what the church’s leaders call “youth” (including all those on the child-adolescent-teenager continuum). This youth presence includes children, grandchildren, and relatives of older members, as well as attendees of Faith Assembly’s daycare and academy. The church’s practices of music and, especially, dance are also bound up with the many young people in attendance.

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15A 2008 study by the Institute of Assets and Social Policy at Brandeis University reports that even among middle class African American families, only 26 percent have the “combination of assets, education, sufficient income, and health insurance to ensure middle-class financial security,” and that “one in three (33 percent) are at high risk of falling out of the middle class.” See Jennifer Wheary, et. al., Economic (In)Security: The Experience of the African-American and Latino Middle Classes, Institute on Assets and Social Policy (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University, 2008), 1.
Overall, Faith Assembly’s development as a church has been shaped by many locally specific factors—such as McKenzie’s personal experience with crime in Durham—and by larger national trends—such as the adoption of business world rhetoric in a ministry context. The result is a church that is perhaps more idiosyncratic and autonomous than the average mainline church, but is nevertheless thoroughly shaped by historical precedent and institutional structures. For one, with a former nightclub for a church building, Faith Assembly joins a long tradition in the United States of worship taking place in repurposed public and commercial spaces. This includes the outdoor worship services that were a key part of slaves’ “invisible institution,” the camp meetings of the 19th century, and the storefront churches that multiplied as waves of African Americans migrated to the urban North in the first half of the 20th century. Moreover, despite emphasizing their non-denominationalism, Faith Assembly maintains connections with several other religious institutions. There are about a half dozen offshoot churches begun by members who left Faith Assembly to pursue their own pastoral callings. Along with the parent church they form an ecumenical unit, with members from each of the churches traveling to special services—conferences, revivals, anniversary services, and the like—held at one of their related institutions. Faith Assembly also has ecumenical ties with several churches in the Durham area including both denominational and non-denominational congregations. Situating Faith Assembly in an historical and theological context requires tracing the broader religious

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17 Two of these churches retained the name Faith Assembly, attaching surnames to distinguish themselves from the parent institution (they are Faith Assembly Christian Center, The Living Word; and Faith Assembly Christian Center, Word of Truth).
structures that have most influenced the church: black pentecostalism and the black electronic church.

**Black Pentecostalism**

*General Characteristics of Early Pentecostal Belief and Practice*

Duke Divinity School professor Grant Wacker’s important text on early Pentecostalism in the United States outlines the “four-fold” gospel that constituted the core beliefs of the first Pentecostals, a group that was fed by several strands of 19th century “radical evangelicals” and that began to cohere around the turn of the century. These early Pentecostals believed in: 1) personal salvation, 2) Holy Ghost baptism, 3) divine healing, and 4) the Lord’s soon return. In other words, in order to get to Heaven, an individual had to proclaim Jesus Christ as a personal savior; in order to be empowered in this life, an individual had to receive the infilling of the Holy Ghost, which was evidenced by speaking in tongues; in order to be healthy in soul and body, an individual had to rely on God; and all of this needed to be in order soon, because Jesus might return at any moment. Pentecostals distinguished themselves from their radical evangelical predecessors primarily in the particulars of part two of the four-fold gospel. While earlier believers had been less concerned with the specific mechanisms of Holy Spirit baptism, Pentecostals claimed that

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18 Several thorough histories of African American pentecostalism exist. I will not rehash the finer details of the movement’s development, but instead highlight some important moments and themes that help illuminate religious practice at Faith Assembly. See, for example, Estrela Alexander, *Black Fire: One Hundred Years of African American Pentecostalism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011); and Cheryl Sanders, *Saints in Exile: The Holiness-Pentecostal Experience in African American Religion and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

tongues speech was the only acceptable “doctrine of initial evidence” of Holy Ghost baptism.\(^\text{20}\)

Early Pentecostals were also well known for what Wacker calls their “turbid emotionalism,” which often resulted in otherworldly soundscapes that included laughter, glossolalia, weeping, crying out, and spontaneous song.\(^\text{21}\) Added to this style of worship—for which believers were often condescendingly labeled “holy rollers”—was a strict moral code, or a lifestyle of “holiness.” Activities like drinking, smoking, gambling, and cursing were strictly prohibited, and \textit{any} activity with “worldly” overtones was suspect.\(^\text{22}\)

The racial dynamics of early Pentecostalism are complex and contested.\(^\text{23}\) But scholars have widely noted the fact that foundational Pentecostal gatherings—especially the Azusa Street revival held in Los Angeles in the first years of the 20th century—were racially integrated. The apparent racial harmony did not last long, however, and Pentecostals, like virtually every other religious group at the time, soon became segregated.\(^\text{24}\) Thus, for most of


\(^{21}\)Wacker, \textit{Heaven Below}, 1. See also Chapter 6 for discussions of the soundscapes of Pentecostal worship.

\(^{22}\)Wacker writes that “At one time or another [Pentecostals] forbade or strongly discouraged (in alphabetical order), bands, baseball, boating, bowling, circuses, fireworks, football, loitering, parades, skating, valentines, and zoos. They also denounced amusement parks, beach parties, big dinners, chatting on the telephone, Christmas trees, crossword puzzles, home movies, ice cream socials, kissing bees, scenic railroad trips, and visiting relatives and going on automobile trips on Sundays.” Wacker, \textit{Heaven Below}, 128.

\(^{23}\)Largely based on whether they determine Pentecostalism’s essential nature to be a matter of doctrine or practice, different scholars have argued—often fervently—for either a predominantly-white or a predominantly-black origin. Others have claimed that early Pentecostalism was characterized by a kind of Edenic racial harmony. For synthesis and critical engagement with these strands of scholarship see Wacker, \textit{Heaven Below}, 227, and Robert Mills, “Musical Prayers: Reflections on the African Roots of Pentecostal Music,” \textit{Journal of Pentecostal Theology} 12 (1998), 110-113.

\(^{24}\)Pentecostal history thus carried on a complex dynamic of racial and denominational segregation/integration that had long characterized religion in the US. Cheryl Sanders writes about “two stages of black Christian alienation and response.” First, blacks established their own Methodist and Baptist denominations because of the racism they experienced in integrated churches. Then, they left Methodist and Baptist denominations “because of a commitment to holiness.” Outside of denominational boundaries, they were “led back into fellowship with whites who had ‘come out’ of the Protestant denominations.” “The emergent Holiness and
the last 100 years, Pentecostal and Pentecostal-influenced believers in the United States have practiced their ecstatic worship in either predominantly black or predominantly white congregations. Because of this, scholars often discuss African American pentecostalism as a distinct tradition.

A Brief Terminological Intervention

The term “Pentecostal” came into use in the first years of the 20th century. The ministers who adopted it sought to emphasize speaking in tongues as the essential “doctrine of initial evidence” that believers had been filled, or “baptized,” by the Holy Spirit. Charles Parham and William Joseph Seymour—the most prominent figures claiming speaking in tongues as a Christian necessity—have often been written about as revolutionaries. But while they were certainly influential, their ministries were distinguished from their Holiness predecessors only by a shift in doctrinal emphasis. Even after the innovations of Parham and Seymour, many African American believers remained connected to Holiness churches. Schisms were frequent in Pentecostal and Holiness churches in the first half of the 20th century, and worship in some churches that labeled themselves “Holiness” could be virtually identical to worship in a “Pentecostal” church. Anthropologist Hans Baer writes that,

While specific African-American religious groups refer to themselves as either “Holiness” or “Pentecostal,” the distinction between the two terms is not always clear-cut. Indeed, within the African-American community there is a strong tendency to lump these two categories together by referring to them as “Sanctified” churches.

Pentecostal groups,” however, “eventually fell into the same pattern, so that by 1924 most of them had become as rigidly segregated by race as the Baptist, Methodist, and other American Protestant churches.” Sanders, Saints in Exile, 19.

Alexander, Black Fire, 17.


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By the 1960s terms such as “Charismatic” and “Evangelical” were also used to describe African American congregations whose worship displayed many of the attributes common to Pentecostal churches.27 The last decades of the 20th century saw a burgeoning of megachurches and televangelism, accompanied by a general de-emphasis on denominationalism, which rendered distinctions between many different labels—Holiness, Pentecostal, Sanctified, Charismatic, neo-Pentecostal—blurry for many African American believers.28 Hearing Faith uses the term pentecostal with a small “p” to refer to the wide range of believers whose practices are strongly influenced by the Acts Chapter 2 narrative about ecstatic worship on the day of Pentecost.

Contemporary African American Pentecostals

In the second half of the 20th century, pentecostal practices spread widely among African American Christians. Estrelda Alexander’s work shows considerable convergence between classical Pentecostals, charismatics, and neo-Pentecostals in terms of theology, practice, and socioeconomic makeup.29 While the four-fold gospel outlined by Grant Wacker still had a deep relevance for this diverse group, in general, African American pentecostal

Gilkes in order to craft a definition of the Sanctified Church as “an African American Christian reform movement that seeks to bring its standards of worship, personal morality, and social concern into conformity with a biblical hermeneutic of holiness and spiritual empowerment” (5). While Sanders’ definition illuminates the major unifying features of Sanctified religion, the complexity of labeling remains; a complexity highlighted by Pentecostal historian James Tinney’s remark that a single Sanctified congregation “may be affiliated with several denominations at different times in its history, or with none at all.” Tinney, “A Theoretical and Historical Comparison of Black Political and Religious Movements,” PhD diss., (Howard University, 1978), 250.

27 Alexander, Black Fire, Chapter 9.

28 This is not to say that believers in some specific churches do not still have a vested interested in making distinctions between these labels. The believers I encountered during my research, however, were much more likely to stress the unity of all Holy Spirit-filled worshipers than denominational distinctions.

29 Alexander, Black Fire, Chapter 9. She defines neo-Pentecostals as those who practice pentecostal worship but still claim mainline denominational affiliation (such as Baptist or African Methodist Episcopal) (355).
ministries lessened their emphasis on doctrinal rigidity. There was what theologians might describe as a shift from the doctrinal to the relational, or, to use Bishop McKenzie’s terminology, from “religiosity” to “relationship.” (This shift is still in progress, and in the course of my research I heard dozens of African American pentecostal pastors, in person and on video, remind their congregations that public displays of spirituality and morality mean nothing unless the believer has cultivated a sound relationship with God, and strives to relate to other people with understanding, compassion, and love).

As a result of this shift, moral strictures loosened somewhat. While sexual morality was still stressed, and activities like smoking and drinking were still (at least rhetorically) prohibited, pentecostal churches became far more flexible in their attitudes toward dress and entertainment. The shift also resulted in a decline of the doctrinal significance of practices like tongues speech, which remained ubiquitous, but was rarely emphasized as the only true evidence of Holy Ghost Baptism. Belief that the end times are upon us remained present, but was much less likely to be a regular sermonic topic.

By the 1990s African American pentecostalism had become increasingly broad and diversified. What theologians Amos Yong and Estrelda Alexander identify as “charismatic independent congregations,” and “neo-Pentecostal currents within the wider black church tradition” proliferated. It was in this context that Faith Assembly emerged. Early members came from a variety of backgrounds, and joined the church primarily as a result of personal connections to McKenzie or his family. Some of them had formerly attended classical Pentecostal churches, others neo-Pentecostal mainline churches, others had not been regular

churchgoers at all. While they have embraced a message, sound, and style that fit squarely within the bounds of small-p pentecostalism, most members—and Bishop McKenzie himself—are relatively unconcerned with “what they are” denominationally, as long as they perceive the Holy Spirit working within the community. At the same time, many church members are adamant about what they are not. Most importantly, they declare—often lightheartedly, but seriously nonetheless—that they are not “Baptist.”

*Faith Assembly as “Not Baptist”*

The term is a catch-all for members at Faith Assembly. “Baptist” may refer broadly to mainline African American Christians whose worship is thought to be spiritless, or “dead,” as Spirit-filled believers often brazenly describe it. These “Baptists” are descendants of what Zora Neale Hurston called the “high-brow tendency in Negro Protestant Congregations,” against which she claimed that the Sanctified church was a “protest.”31 Similarly, Faith Assembly firmly asserts that their worship stands in opposition to the practices of high-brow “Baptists.” On August 12, 2012, for example, Bishop McKenzie preached,

> Remember the golden calf?  
> When Moses was up on the mountain and the people started worshiping the calf?  
> That’s what some Christians are doing today.  
> They’re going over to “Big Time Baptist III,”  
> Where there’s no Spirit,  
> Where the preacher don’t preach but fifteen minutes,  
> Where no one is demanding that they live holy.

In other words, McKenzie claims that attendees at “Big Time Baptist III” are not actually worshiping God, but, instead, are worshipping the cultural capital that they may accrue by affiliation with such an institution.32

31Hurston, *The Sanctified Church*, 103.
In addition to this culturally refined yet spiritually deficient stereotype, Faith Assembly also sets itself in opposition to the stereotype of the Baptist “country” church. These backwoods “Baptists” are those who are thought to be stuck in the past, still singing the songs their grandparents sang, and singing them in the same manner. A number of Faith Assembly’s members, including Pastor Mary McKenzie, grew up in the rural areas surrounding Durham. Churches they attended or knew about in these places (many of them with “Baptist” in their name) provide reference points for the “country” church stereotype.

In a fascinating conflation of the “elitist” and “country” “Baptist” stereotypes, a group of women choreographed a jesting dance routine for a 2010 New Year’s Eve service at Faith Assembly. The MC announced the dancers as representatives of “Hard Rock Baptist Church,” a play on the name “White Rock Baptist,” the longstanding “highbrow” African American institution that is located less than a half-mile down the road from Faith Assembly. Wearing a grey wig and a black and red robe, one of Faith Assembly’s female ministers walked to the altar singing a blue-note-rich “Baptist” moan, “Praaaise tha Lawd! I said, Praaaise tha Lawd!” Feigning a “country” accent she said, “We heard ya’ll had a celebration here on tonight… So I brought my members over. Is it alright if we come celebrate with ya’ll? Hallelujah. We wants to testify.”

The Hard Rock “members” then came to the altar. One wore pink and orange plaid pants with a clashing blue plaid shawl. Another had stuffed a basketball under a raggedy black and white blouse, holding her “pregnant belly” as she danced with a bandana tied

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32 The idea that embracing the sensibilities of the white middle and upper class diminishes the spiritual efficacy of a church has been preached by black Spirit-filled church leaders ever since free blacks in America could embrace such sensibilities. Examples abound. For a recent scholarly examination of a church whose pastor continues to make this opposition a dominant theme see, Timothy Nelson, Every Time I Feel the Spirit (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

33 This dance occurred on December 31, 2010.
around her head. The skirt of another woman went from the floor all the way up to her bosom, and she wore a clashing scarf and a large hat. The other women were similarly dressed, most had their head covered in some way and one even danced hunched over a walking cane. Together the eight women danced to Evelyn Turrentine Agee’s 2000 recording, “God Did It,” a song whose chicken-scratch guitar picking, quartet-style groove, and straightforward gospel-blues structure mark it as thoroughly “Baptist” for Faith Assembly’s members. The congregation roared in laughter during this dance, but many also clapped along enthusiastically, some of them cutting their own “Baptist” dance steps.

This dance speaks volumes about how Faith Assembly sees itself in relation to “the Baptist church.” By calling themselves members of the “Hard Rock Baptist” church, the dancers were clearly making a reference to White Rock Baptist down the street. Their movements and fashion, however, suggested that they were not churchgoers at a place like White Rock, but truly countrified “Baptists.” And, of course, given the jesting nature of the dance, the dancers were declaring that they were, in reality, neither form of “Baptist.” That these women would decide to choreograph such a dance, however, and that it would go over so well with the congregation (both in terms of their laughter and participation) suggests that what they are jibing is close to home. It also implies that the differences between Faith Assembly and “Baptists” are mostly surface-level—fashion, age of members, musical style, and so on. The idea that “Everything that happened to me that was good, God did it,” as Evelyn Turrentine Agee sings in the song to which the dance was choreographed, is a sentiment that Faith Assembly wholeheartedly embraces, in solidarity with even the most backwoods of “Baptists.”
“Baptist,” then, for members at Faith Assembly refers to a set of stereotypes that they define themselves against. Importantly, the boundaries created by these stereotypes are relatively fluid, and church members’ rhetorical declarations of “not Baptist” are, in general, playful and good-natured. In other words, most churchgoers at Faith Assembly have little problem accepting that Baptists—especially Baptists of the more Spirit-filled variety—are truly saved. The differences that they proclaim relate mostly to matters of style and aesthetics. Furthermore, every church with the word “Baptist” in its name is not necessarily one of these stereotyped “Baptist” institutions. There are Baptist churches that embrace very un-“Baptist” styles of music, fashion, and worship. This is the case for many Full Gospel Baptist churches, for example. In fact, the presiding bishop of the Full Gospel Baptist Church Fellowship, Bishop Paul Morton, is also a recording artist whose songs are Praise and Worship favorites at Faith Assembly.\(^\text{34}\)

In sum, the concept of “Baptist” for members of Faith Assembly is one whose meaning can encompass a fairly large range of believers. The concept is mobilized by churchgoers at Faith Assembly primarily as one means through which they negotiate the boundaries of their own religious identity.

**The Black Electronic Church**

In May of 2012, Bishop and Pastor McKenzie took over a dozen members from Faith Assembly to Orlando, Florida, to attend televangelist T.D. Jakes’ “Pastors and Leadership” conference. The next month, Pastor Mary McKenzie devoted a weeknight service to viewing a commercially-released DVD of Jakes’ sermon “The Spellbreaker.” For the next several weeks, she preached a series of Sunday morning messages based on the themes of Jakes’

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\(^{34}\)The Minister of Music who began working at Faith Assembly in early 2013 is in fact a member of the Full Gospel Baptist Fellowship, and enjoys jesting members of the Praise Team by proudly proclaiming his Baptist heritage: “I’m Baptist born and Baptist bred and when I die I’ll be Baptist dead.”
broadcasted sermon. Since I first became affiliated with Faith Assembly in 2002, the figure and ministry of Jakes has been a constant presence at the church. Bishop McKenzie regularly interweaves phrases and ideas from Jakes’ televised broadcasts into his own messages. Once he lightheartedly boasted that he had seen a television preview of Jakes’ upcoming sermon and the Texas-based preacher was going to be preaching on the same topic as McKenzie that week. He said that he had heard about another televangelist preaching something similar as well. “Hey, we’re right in tune with what they’re preaching,” McKenzie exclaimed. “Why?” he asked rhetorically, “because when God speaks the anointing don’t stop in Texas…Look at somebody and say, ‘It’ll flow to Durham!’”

Faith Assembly’s engagement—and claimed supernatural connection—with T.D. Jakes suggests the extent to which the church’s activities, beliefs, and practices are thoroughly intertwined with what Jonathan Walton calls the “black electronic church phenomenon.” According to Walton, the phenomenon comprises television ministries, their associated products, and megachurches who model their practices on televised worship. Ministries disseminated through the mass-media—recordings, radio, television, and most recently the internet—have played a major role in African American religious life for most of the last century. Contemporary televangelists like T.D. Jakes reach enormous international audiences, and, along with a few athletes and musicians, rank among the most prominent

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37 While Walton’s inclusion of “ministry related products” as part of the broader “phenomenon” might be taken to include musical recordings, one lacuna in his work is its failure to engage with the gospel music industry in detail. This industry is intimately connected with television ministries and major megachurches.

38 See Chapter 1 in Walton, Watch This!
African Americans in the world. At the same time, while these figures’ flamboyant eccentricity signals spiritual authenticity to their followers, it often inspires revulsion in their detractors, and scholarship focused on these public religious personalities has been slow to emerge. Nevertheless, the role they play in shaping belief and practice—and, by extension, peoples’ lives—at local institutions like Faith Assembly is undeniable. Thus, Walton’s work represents a major contribution to the scholarly literature on African American Christianity. His claims that are most important to this chapter’s goals are best understood in relation to criticisms of the black electronic church.

**Criticisms**

African American televangelists are perpetually mired in controversy. For example, in the last five years, Bishop Eddie Long and Reverend Creflo Dollar—two of the most prominent African American televangelists, and ministers that figure prominently in Walton’s work—have faced serious allegations of homosexual impropriety with minors (Long), child abuse (Dollar), and financial misconduct (both). Because televangelists often live lives of conspicuous luxury and preach messages focused on prosperity, they are commonly criticized by everyday conversationalists, bloggers, YouTube video creators, and journalists for their apparent avarice and unsound doctrine. Scholars of African American Christianity have often echoed these claims, and added to them critiques of televangelists’ “hyperperformativity,” insistence on heteronormativity, and emphasis on a capitalist ethos.

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over and above the gospel message. While these criticisms are not, for the most part, unfounded, they have led many scholars to discursively lump together all televangelists and disavow the entire lump. The historiography of African American Christianity, as Princeton African American studies professor Eddie Glaude says, has given us a simplistic “battle between Rev. Ike and Dr. King.” “We’ve told ourselves a story that flattens the complexity,” Glaude says, where anything in black churches that resembles the ministry of the flamboyant 1970s prosperity-preaching televangelist is bad, anything that resembles the ministry of the major civil rights leader is good. The consequence of this legacy of scholarship has been an implicit suggestion that all of the millions of “Rev. Ike Christians” are little more than captives of ideology and social forces. In order to respond to this discursive denial of agency, it is necessary to, first, recognize that televangelism itself is not as monolithic as it has been taken to be, and, second, understand how individuals and local church communities adapt the ideas and practices of televised ministry to their own needs. Realizing these two goals will help us more clearly see the significance of the black electronic church for Faith Assembly.

*Theological Currents in the Black Electronic Church*

Jonathan Walton notes “three dominant yet diverse ecclesiastical perspectives that constitute” the black electronic church phenomenon. These are the “post-Pentecostal perspective,” the “Charismatic black mainline perspective,” and the “neo-Charismatic Word of Faith perspective.” Walton claims that these are not mutually exclusive categories, but

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40All of these critiques were voiced by one or more of the six preeminent contemporary black church scholars who participated in a 2010 “Roundtable on the Future of Black Churches” hosted by Columbia University. Video of the event is available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7r8Djfxu1Bk2.


“concentric circles that individually represent a distinct religious perspective but together constitute the larger phenomenon.” The categories identified by Walton intersect and overlap with aspects of my discussion of black pentecostalism above, showing the extent to denominational traditions and television ministries are mutually influential.

Post-Pentecostal ministries, like that of T.D. Jakes, “extend from one of the recognized classical Pentecostal movements,” but eschew much of the morally-driven asceticism and “hellfire and brimstone” doctrine of the earlier group. Walton also notes that fashion is an important means through which post-Pentecostals distinguish themselves from their classical counterparts. Male preachers are “known for their custom made zoot suits with matching colored gators as well as being conspicuously adorned with jewelry.” Female preachers often wear “sequined outfits, four inch heels and custom fitted ecclesial robes.”

The Charismatic black mainline perspective is associated with ministries, like that of Baltimore-based African Methodist Episcopal pastor and televangelist Jamal Bryant, that maintain a connection to mainline denominations, but have adopted charismatic practices including glossolalia and holy dancing. Many of these ministries, Walton shows, have also embraced new titles for church leaders and altered denominationally-accepted organizational structures.

The neo-Charismatic Word of Faith perspective, represented in the ministry of Creflo Dollar, is one that historian Estrelda Alexander claims “has so permeated black charismatic

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43Ibid., 110.

44Ibid., 110. The “classical Pentecostal movements” for African Americans include those such as The Church of God in Christ (the largest and most well-known), and a number of others discussed by Cheryl Sanders in Saints in Exile: The Holiness-Pentecostal Experience in African American Religion and Culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).


46Ibid., 121.
culture that it is evident in congregations and ministries that would not explicitly identify themselves with that label or even claim that theology as their own.” Walton points out that the neo-Charismatic Word of Faith perspective “has no official ties to any of the classical Pentecostal fellowships or any other ecclesiastical denominations.” He continues,

Known by many names—i.e., Word of Faith, Word-Faith, Faith Formula theology, Positive Confession Theology and the Prosperity Gospel—this ecclesial perspective emerged from the brushfires of the post World War II charismatic revivals. [It] does share many characteristics with other popular contemporary religious movements but it is a distinct subculture.

This perspective requires a bit more explanation than the other two. There are three “core beliefs and practices” that mark it as distinct. First, Word of Faith adherents conceive of the relationship between believer and God as essentially a contractual one. Through the Bible, they say, God has made certain promises to His people—eternal salvation being but one of them; most of the others center on the idea that He wants health and prosperity for believers in this life. If the believer holds up his or her end of the contract (living righteously, paying tithes, and so on) then God is obligated to hold up His end. Second, Word of Faith adherents practice “positive confession.” They believe that they are able to “speak things into existence,” by speaking “the same things about themselves that God has spoken about them in the Bible.” Just as God spoke out loud to create the world, these believers hold that if they are in the right relationship with God, they can make things—blessings, healings, even money—manifest through their spoken words. Third, Word of Faith adherents believe that to understand and successfully practice the first two core beliefs is to “unlock prosperity.”


of Faith teachers affirm “that God desires everyone to live a life of health and wealth. [They] reject traditional notions of Jesus as poor.” They teach instead that “Jesus was financially prosperous and desires the same for all believers.” This Prosperity Gospel claims that “poverty and illness are not social realities for those in Christ but a mindset, a spiritual curse.” Ultimately, the Word of Faith perspective allows that Christians can reach a state of perpetual transcendence, a metaphysical reality where “laws of nature no longer apply.”

While mass media and popular culture accounts have frequently painted all black televangelists as two-dimensional instantiations of Daddy Rich—Richard Pryor’s prosperity-preaching character from the 1976 film *Car Wash*—Walton’s three perspectives show that there are significant differences among constituents of the black electronic church in terms of history, doctrine, and practice. And, because the electronic church is so influential, these differences have real consequences for the nature of the local church communities and for the lives of those communities’ members.

*Faith Assembly and the Black Electronic Church*

Step into Faith Assembly’s sanctuary and one will see an elevated stage front and center. The stage is flanked by towers of white speakers hanging from the ceiling, and two large projection screens. There is no altar or pulpit to speak of. There is a movable clear plastic lectern bearing the church’s name and the words “changing a generation through faith, one soul at a time” in decorative white lettering. Traditional iconography cannot be found. A large mural stretching across the side wall just below the ceiling shows clouds and dark-skinned angels in misty pastels. Its stylized spray-painted title, ‘City of Faith’, looks like the

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51 Ibid., 137.
52 Ibid., 137.
work of a Christian graffiti artist. Congregants sit in chairs, not pews. Behind them, in an elevated structure, the camera operators and sound technicians look over their heads toward the stage.

Faith Assembly’s worship space unmistakably bears the imprint of the electronic church. Like so many other contemporary pentecostal churches, they have modeled their style and décor on churches they see on television. Not only do they embrace the look of broadcast worship, but they strive to make it a reality. Their services are streamed on the free internet platform *Ustream*, and broadcast on a local cable access channel. Pastor Mary McKenzie periodically “prophesies”—in the playfully boastful style common to black pentecostal rhetoric—that we, the congregation, will turn on the Word Network one of these days and see her face.⁵³

A general desire to look televised and to be televised is clear at Faith Assembly. How exactly this shapes their doctrine and practice is less explicit. Ideas from all three of Walton’s perspectives make their way into the church at one time or another. Church leaders sample themes and phrases from various televangelists, but, importantly, the logic of what exactly they sample is based more on “what hits their spirit” than on any explicit theological criteria. This is a basic stance that Pastor Mary McKenzie generally advocates for all believers. On October 9, 2011, she preached to the congregation,

> If this word that I’m teaching don’t hit your spirit then it ain’t your word. But if the word of God hits your spirit, then *that’s your word*! Amen. And it can be anybody’s word because the word is in the Bible.

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⁵³The Word Network is a cable television network that claims to be “available in over 200 countries,” and to “reach 86 million homes in the U.S. alone.” See www.thewordnetwork.org/about. Prominent Chicago pastor and black liberation theologian Otis Moss III has said that “If anything is killing or destroying the black church it might be the Word Network.” See Moss’ comments beginning at 29:30 in “A Roundtable on the Future of Black Churches,” [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7r8Djfxu1Bk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7r8Djfxu1Bk).
Thus, for Pastor McKenzie, if something preached by a televangelist resonates with her, and she deems it to be biblically sound, then she may reiterate it to her congregation. Ultimately, however, credit is given to God. Such a moment of insight—something hitting one’s spirit—and its subsequent reiteration, represent what Bishop or Pastor McKenzie would call a “move of the Holy Ghost,” or the “flow of the anointing.” In informal conversations that I had with Bishop McKenzie about various televangelists, he always expressed more interest in their “level of anointing” than any particular theological bent. He had an affinity for T.D. Jakes because he believed that there was a “powerful anointing on his life.” This criterion for assessment worked the other way as well. For example, one Sunday morning following a Saturday night revival service at which a prominent televangelist had delivered a sermon as a guest preacher, McKenzie encouraged Faith Assembly’s congregation to consult their Bibles concerning what had been spoken the night before. Regardless of his fame, McKenzie said, “if what he preached ain’t in the book, then there’s no anointing.”

In sum, Faith Assembly’s close engagement with the black electronic church establishes certain aesthetic and theological boundaries within which the church navigates its own course. A metaphor employed by Jonathan Walton in a recent article about attendees at a large Word of Faith conference is instructive. Drawing from interviews and conversations with conference-goers who talked about strategically embracing some elements of Word of Faith doctrine and rejecting others, Walton concluded that “the Word of Faith movement offers a theological chord structure from which persons can theologically riff and spiritually improvise.”

Broadening the metaphor, it is useful to think of the black electronic church as

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a musical genre, and Faith Assembly as an unsigned band that embraces the distinguishing characteristics of that genre. Based on the particular predispositions and abilities of the band’s members, they selectively combine musical elements that fit the genre in order to create their own sound within circumscribed limits. The metaphor is illuminating, but need not be stretched too far. Ultimately, *Hearing Faith* offers neither an apologia for the black electronic church nor an enumeration of its many faults, but seeks to engage it only insofar as it figures prominently in the ways that contemporary African American believers negotiate the challenges of life and belief.

The next section of the chapter moves from a discussion of the theological foundations of Faith Assembly’s practice to a consideration of clerical and liturgical structures at the church.

**Clerical and Liturgical Structure at Faith Assembly**

There is a clearly-defined leadership hierarchy at Faith Assembly and believers emphasize the importance of operating “in order,” or, in other words, remaining mindful and respectful of this hierarchy. Similar to many independent evangelical institutions, the church recognizes their head pastor as a divinely-granted authority that has the last word on all church-related matters. Faith Assembly has been led for most of its existence—and, again, this is quite common at similar churches—by a husband and wife ministry “team.” Based on scriptures such as Ephesians 5:23, believers recognize the husband to be the highest authority in the church and the wife to be the second highest.\(^{55}\) When Faith Assembly was first founded, Leroy and Mary McKenzie took the titles of Pastor and Co-pastor respectively. Leroy McKenzie was soon “elevated” to Bishop in a ceremony presided over by one of his

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\(^{55}\)The scripture reads: “For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the savior of the body.”
ministry mentors, and, later, Mary McKenzie was elevated to Pastor. When Bishop McKenzie passed away in October 2012, Pastor McKenzie became the highest authority at Faith Assembly. There are two men at the church that have also been elevated to the title Pastor. They work closely with McKenzie, MCing the opening praise and worship portion of each service, and preaching in her absence, but they are understood to have a level of authority below hers.

Though the church recognizes Pastor McKenzie’s generally autocratic power, there are many other people at the church who play leadership roles. These individuals have titles that, like the titles “Bishop” and “Pastor,” come from literal readings of the Bible rather than from denominational decree. Table 2.1 briefly outlines these titles, how they fit into a leadership structure, and the approximate number of people who hold each title.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Number with Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bishop</td>
<td>Male who leads the church, preaches, and generally has authority over all church business.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pastor</td>
<td>Male or female who preaches and is recognized by the community as having the necessary training, skills, and anointing to be the church’s head authority.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

56 In independent churches such as Faith Assembly the conferral of titles is usually presided over by one who already has that title (or a higher title). In the several ceremonies I have witnessed, however, the conferring authority has repeatedly stressed that this is merely a formality, that a title only has validity if it is granted by the Holy Spirit.

57 Spirit-filled churchgoers understand the “qualifications” to become a Bishop as those outlined in 1 Timothy 3:1-11. Verse 2, for example, reads, “A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality, apt to teach.”

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Minister</td>
<td>Male or female with the calling, anointing, and proven ability to preach (i.e. has preached at least one “initial sermon”). Fully-committed to the “vision” of the church and able to assist the Bishop or Pastor in ministering to the needs of congregants. They lead Sunday School classes and intercessory prayer, pray over and disperse communion sacraments, and perform other similar functions.</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armor Bearer</td>
<td>Personal assistants to Bishop or Pastor. Usually carries the leader’s Bible (i.e. “bears the armor,” or the “sword of the Spirit”). Called by God to assist the leader in “spiritual warfare” with prayers, fasting, sacrificing, etc. Shadows the preacher during altar calls.</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deacon / Deaconess</td>
<td>Fully committed to the spiritual “vision” of the church; help with whatever is needed. Preside over the giving of tithes and offerings.</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Usher</td>
<td>Male or female who welcomes and seats incoming churchgoers. Attend to needs of congregants (especially visitors). Helps with altar calls.</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Older women (usually over-65), whose prayers and presence are understood to play a special role in spiritually “covering” (protecting and guiding) the church community.</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brother / Sister</td>
<td>Any churchgoer without a leadership title.</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Leadership is an important part of church life at Faith Assembly. Roughly 40 percent of the church’s members have some kind of leadership title. A sociological analysis on the order of Robert Mapes Anderson’s work on Pentecostalism would likely point to such proliferation of titles as a means through which African Americans compensate for a historical lack of sociopolitical power. But the harsh light of such explanatory clarity would occlude a deeper consideration of how the power that these titled individuals wield actually shapes their community. Employing worldly and spiritual means, leaders at Faith Assembly

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58 Ephesians 6:17.

provide churchgoers with instruction, comfort, and strength. When Bishop McKenzie passed away, for example, Ministers at the church counseled grieving members, prayed before the congregation, and worked on the practical details of funeral arrangements.

In general, Bishop and Pastor McKenzie have emphasized two dimensions of the clerical authority granted through titles, one connected to not being “of the world,” and the other connected to being “in the world.” First, leadership titles are said to reflect a church member’s true spiritual identity. Even though one must undergo a period of training and a ceremony to receive a title, the church holds that these are only outward manifestations of a divine decree. A title like Minister reflects the essence of that person’s identity as God sees it. Whatever else one may be—mother, wife, nurse, social security number xxx-xx-xxxx—in the cosmic scheme of things, these are all less significant, even less real, than one’s identity as Pastor, or Minister, or Deacon.

The second dimension of authority roles emphasized by the McKenzies is that they prepare one to effectively operate as a leader in other aspects of life. Even if one’s title means absolutely nothing to anyone outside of the Faith Assembly community, carrying out that role within the community should translate into increased capability to lead in situations related to one’s job, family life, social interactions, and so on. This reflects a broader, repeatedly emphasized theme at Faith Assembly, that one’s true spiritual identity should continually shine forth in one’s life, not only when one is in church.

Ultimately, the discussion of clerical authority at Faith Assembly highlights another dialectic of critical importance for the church, that between human and divine power. One’s title is supposed to be conferred by God, and therefore an indicator of the level of anointing under which one operates. Thus, believers accepted that Bishop McKenzie was justified in
exercising the most *human* power at the church because they understood such power to be divinely consecrated. Nevertheless, believers remain keenly aware of 1 John 2:27 which declares that “the anointing which ye have received of him abideth in you, and ye need not that any man teach you…” They recognize that even the most anointed within a community sometimes operate “outside of the anointing.” Believers therefore generally accept that all churchgoers, regardless of what title they may or may not have, should seek revelation through prayer, scripture, and fasting. The decree of one with a title should never be uncritically accepted. Moreover, they say, nothing can be assumed to be permanent; one never knows whom God may choose to elevate or whom He may “decrease.” Jesus showed a special favoritism to lepers, blind beggars, and prostitutes, believers will point out. There is no guarantee that in any given situation God will necessarily grant more power to a Bishop, Pastor, or Minister than to a Brother or Sister, or even to one of the unsaved.60

Believers’ recognition of the unpredictability of God’s dispersal of power does not, however, destabilize the hierarchy of clerical leadership at Faith Assembly. While scriptures emphasizing the human inability to know the ways of God are commonly heard at the church (Isaiah 55:8-9), so too are scriptures emphasizing order and admonishing believers to faithfully submit to authority, worldly and spiritual (1 Peter 2:13-18). In general, church members share the notion that the fruits of one’s authority speak for themselves. The justification for Bishop and Pastor McKenzie’s authority lies in the blessings their words and actions have brought to others, their prophecies that have “come to pass,” and the number of

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60In one Sunday School class in which I sat in on at Faith Assembly, the teacher—a minister at the church—taught a group of adolescents that if they had received the baptism of the Holy Ghost, then they had “every bit as much power as Bishop of Pastor.” Similarly, one of the singers in the Praise Team stressed to me in conversation in June 2012 that “[The Praise Team’s] job is as important as Bishop’s or Pastor’s. It’s not more important, necessarily, but *as* important. See, we have to break the yokes off the people. We have to usher in the anointing so God will lift that heaviness; so the people will have a heart to hear the Word.”
people who have been saved and delivered at their hands. By the same reasoning, those with lesser titles should also produce “fruit” in accordance with their level of authority; those who do not may become suspect in the eyes of churchgoers. Bishop McKenzie regularly “sat down” members whose actions he deemed dissonant with their leadership titles. When this happened it was not uncommon to hear grumblings within the congregation about whether such a move was inspired by Spirit or flesh. Despite these grumblings, however, Bishop’s authority to make such decisions remained by and large unquestioned. In a few rare instances, believers who had a major disagreement with McKenzie simply left the church rather than pushing against his authority in some other way. In an environment with this kind of distribution of “natural” power, individual believers strive to remain spiritually empowered. And they do so in the act of worship as they engage in another dialectical balancing act: that between static and ecstatic structures.

Static and Ecstatic Liturgical Structures

Among her many indispensable contributions to the study of African American pentecostalism, Cheryl Sanders’ discussion of the dialectic of static and ecstatic structures in worship remains, for me, one of the most illuminating. She writes,

> Static structures are those elements in worship that represent a state of equilibrium or rest. …These structures…embody the potential energy of the worshipping congregation to explode into ecstatic expression: shouting or holy dance, tongues-speaking, spontaneous utterances, and lifting holy hands.\(^{61}\)

In general, static structures are those that are preplanned and ecstatic structures are those that emerge in the course of worship according to, as believers say, “how the Spirit moves.” Of course, ecstatic structures are not entirely random or unexpected. Sanders says,

\(^{61}\)Cheryl Sanders, Saints in Exile, 60.
…some forms and events in worship reflect both fixed and fluid elements at the same time. For example, the quintessential ecstatic expression in Sanctified worship is the shout, or holy dance, which usually occurs as a spontaneous eruption [but has] characteristic steps, motions, rhythms, and syncopations…It is not a wild and random expression of kinetic energy.\textsuperscript{62}

Table 2:2 outlines the static structures of the Sunday worship service at Faith Assembly.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Segment</th>
<th>Leader / Activity</th>
<th>Approximate Length</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercessory Prayer</td>
<td>1 or 2 volunteers from congregation, usually Ministers</td>
<td>5 - 15 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Praise and Worship</td>
<td>Praise Team, 2 or 3 songs</td>
<td>15 - 25 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Master of Ceremonies (MC), exhortation and welcome</td>
<td>5 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Choreographed Dance</td>
<td>5 - 10 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MC, exhortation and recognition of birthdays, anniversaries, and visitors</td>
<td>10 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Praise Team, 1 or 2 songs</td>
<td>10 - 15 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Word (Sermon)</td>
<td>Bishop or Pastor McKenzie</td>
<td>60 - 90 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Altar Call</td>
<td>Many participants; presided over by Bishop or Pastor</td>
<td>10 - 30 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offering</td>
<td>Church Deacons</td>
<td>5 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Announcements</td>
<td>Various</td>
<td>5 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closing Prayer / Benediction</td>
<td>Bishop or Pastor McKenzie</td>
<td>2 minutes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The structure of the church’s services is similar to many contemporary African American pentecostal churches.\textsuperscript{63} Most churchgoers claim that this structure is important, however, not because it follows convention or historical precedent but because it is spiritually efficacious. In other words, this particular configuration of static structures

\textsuperscript{62}\textit{Ibid., 61.}

\textsuperscript{63}These structures are also similar to those outlined by Sanders as common to most Pentecostal-Charismatic congregations, although the terminology of “praise and worship” (see Table 2:2) had not been adopted by the examples she cites from the 1970s, 80s, and early 90s. Sanders, \textit{Saints in Exile}, 49-57.
maximizes the potential power of the ecstatic structures. The “intercessor(s)” who open with prayer invite God into the building and banish Satan and his “minions.” They “cover” those who may not have the knowledge or ability to pray for themselves. These prayers technically occur before church (they start about 9:50 AM, and Praise and Worship officially begins at 10:00). Often the sanctuary is sparsely populated; churchgoers are just arriving or still milling about. The prayers thus serve to consecrate the space as much as to reach people. Making the sanctuary welcoming to God’s presence is a necessary first step in successful worship.

Once the space has been acted upon through prayer, the primary goal of Praise and Worship, believers say, is to “set the atmosphere.” Through song, exhortation, dance, and congregational participation, believers work to “lift the spirit of heaviness” (Isaiah 61:3), and “break the yokes” (Isaiah 10:27). While the cares of “the world” keep people distracted and divided, Praise and Worship seeks to aim peoples’ attention solely on God, thus bringing them together “on one accord” (Acts 2:1) and allowing the Spirit to act on their hearts, bodies, and minds. During Praise and Worship the Master of Ceremonies (MC) will often rhetorically emphasize the need to stick to “protocol.” But this usually functions as a kind of verbal prodding; a deliberate attempt to push the congregation to participate more fervently so that the service might edge toward more ecstatic structures. Some divergence from protocol almost always occurs during the course of Praise and Worship, be it an outbreak of holy dancing, an extended reprise of a song, or a mini-sermon-like exhortation delivered by the MC or one of the singers. Without such moments, churchgoers say, a service is “dry” or “dead.” But, even more importantly, Bishop and Pastor McKenzie both told me, the give-and-take of static and ecstatic elements during Praise and Worship works to open peoples’
spirits to be able to receive the Word of God. The emergence of ecstatic elements indexes the Holy Spirit’s presence and, thus, shows that the atmosphere has been properly set for the Word of God to “come forth.” If the atmosphere has not been stirred by the Spirit’s presence, then preaching will be like, in the poetic words of one of Faith Assembly’s singers, “trying to hack your way through the jungle with a machete.” Unless the way has been prepared through successful Praise and Worship, many obstacles will stand between the preacher’s message and the congregations’ ability to spiritually “hear.” They may perceive the words, but their spirits will not be reached.

The metaphor of “ushering in” has special significance in African American Spirit-filled discourse about Praise and Worship. Gospel scholar Deborah Smith-Pollard suggests its importance when she writes in her chapter on “The Rise of Praise and Worship Music in the Urban Church,” that the mission of singers during a Praise and Worship service is “to move congregants from passive observation to active participation in the worship experience so that they might usher in and experience the presence of God.” This metaphor reveals much about African American Spirit-filled worshipers’ conception and perception of the Holy Spirit.

First, in order to be ushered, the usheree must already be present. When speaking of ushering on a purely human level, ushers do not bring people to church, they merely serve to welcome and direct those who have already come on their own accord. So when believers use the metaphor to refer to the Holy Ghost, they suggest that He does not need to be brought to church. They do not “summon,” or “beckon,” or “call” the Holy Ghost, He has already decided to come to church. The goal of Praise and Worship, then, is not to bring about the

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64 Conversation with Minister Arnita Blacknell, May 9, 2010.

65 Pollard, *When the Church Becomes Your Party*, 17.
presence of the Spirit, but to make it feel welcome. To usher in is to acknowledge, make eye contact with; to provide a formal gesture implying “we accept you here and want you to feel comfortable among us.”

Second, a good usher knows how to direct incoming congregants to the right place in the sanctuary. He or she keeps the loud talkers and gossips separated so that they won’t distract others during service. Those with a predilection for holy dancing will be directed to a seat from which they can easily make their way into the aisles, and the loud-praisers to the front of the congregation where their utterances can best encourage the preacher. In an analogous fashion, to usher in the Holy Spirit is to sing, dance, and praise in a way that directs His presence toward those who need Him most.

Third, there is something relatively mundane about “ushering in.” The idea does not evoke an image of the suddenly miraculous—explosions, or thunderbolts, or bursts of flames. The very act of ushering is calm and polite, refined and orderly. Those who do it are not the elite organizers or the benefactors of a particular venue or event, but act more as servants. Ushering is a job. It must be done week after week with an attitude of devoted servitude. To effectively usher in the Holy Spirit is to, despite external circumstances (e.g. currently unanswered prayers or various kinds of trouble or worry), welcome Him kindly and respectfully, to make Him feel “at home,” and offer Him anything He needs.

After the Spirit is ushered in during Praise and Worship, the preacher will come and stand front and center on the stage. At Faith Assembly, as at many similar Spirit-filled churches, the preacher’s sermon is usually referred to as “the Word.” This terminology suggests the extent to which churchgoers understand this part of the service to be a direct channeling of God’s message through the medium of a preacher. A “sermon” is a text
constructed by a human, Bishop McKenzie says, but a Word is a divine “impartation.” McKenzie suggests that hearers may enjoy a sermon, but they need a Word. Believers understand that the Holy Spirit gives the preacher revelation about the immediate needs of the people, and the preacher, in turn, delivers that revelation, providing necessary instruction, direction, and knowledge.

The emphasis on divine inspiration points toward the two main ways in which ecstatic and static structures intertwine in the delivery of the Word. First, though preachers at Faith Assembly often use notes to deliver a predetermined message, they stress that delivering this message is not as important as being “used by God.” At any moment, the message may veer into unplanned territory. Bishop and Pastor McKenzie’s messages have often been peppered with statements such as, “I don’t know how I got here [i.e. to this particular topic],” or “I wasn’t headed in this direction today, but…,” or “Ya’ll know I didn’t come to talk about [topic X], but I’m just going to let the Holy Ghost have His way.”

Second, while the preacher’s improvisatory freedom allows for ecstatic elements to enter into the essentially static structure of “the Word,” a more extreme manifestation of the dialectic occurs when the message is interrupted by the emergence of ecstatic structures, usually shouting. As the church shouts, the preacher may interject sung or chanted phrases related to the message, but his or her primary role has shifted from delivering a Word to presiding over a collective “praise session.” In some pentecostal churches, virtually every message leads to shouting. At Faith Assembly, Pastor Mary McKenzie’s messages very often stoke the fires of praise simmering in the congregation, and unfold in sections interrupted by shouting interludes. Bishop McKenzie’s messages led to shouting less frequently. He often claimed that churchgoers needed teaching and instruction more than they needed “a shout.”

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In one message he claimed that “Church has become too ‘emotionalized.’ I came this morning to give you something you can use during the week, not to holler and scream at you.”

The Word concludes by segueing into the altar call. The altar call is common practice in many evangelical churches. It is, at root, an invitation to receive salvation. Members of the congregation can come forward to the altar and accept—usually with the guidance of the Bishop or Pastor—Jesus Christ as their savior, at which point they become saved. The invitation is commonly extended not only to those who have never been “born again,” but also to “backsliders”—those who were once saved but have reverted to a sinful state. At Faith Assembly, as at most pentecostal institutions, this invitation to receive salvation is only one function of the altar call. Given that great majority of regularly attending members of the church are assumed to be saved, it is only occasionally that anyone comes forward to “receive salvation.” Many do come forward, however, for prayer. In fact, church members commonly refer to this portion of a service simply as “Prayer.” In this instance, prayer means a heightened mode of intensely focused communication with the Holy Spirit. Prayer might address any particular hardship or issue a person is dealing with. The one receiving prayer stands with Bishop or Pastor McKenzie in hopes of concentrating and directing the Holy Spirit’s power toward a particular need. This is often a time of “spiritual warfare,” where Bishop and Pastor McKenzie “cast out” or “speak the blood of Jesus to” demons that they “discern in the Spirit” are attacking the prayer recipient. The altar call is technically a static structure in that it occurs during every worship service. What happens within this structure, however, is highly improvisatory. This includes the prayers uttered in English and

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67Bishop Leroy McKenzie, FACC, April 1, 2012.
glossolalia, the musical accompaniment, and the congregation’s gestural and verbal responses.

The remaining parts of the service are all essentially static structures, unfolding in more-or-less the same manner week after week. For believers, the Holy Spirit’s *active* work—for this particular service—is done. This does not, however, diminish the significance of the remainder of the service. The offering, Bishop and Pastor McKenzie claim, is particularly important; blessings cannot flow if one does not make the requisite sacrifices. According to them, even if someone received a Spirit-filled revelation in an earlier part of the service—perhaps a promise of healing or of deliverance from some sin or temptation—that person must sacrificially confirm God’s promise through the giving of tithes and offerings. If he or she fails to do so, “manifestation” may not occur. Following this ritual of giving, the solidarity of the church as a community is reconfirmed through the announcements, and a closing prayer provides a clear conclusion.  

To recap the key functions of the static structures of the worship service according to Spirit-filled believers: intercessory prayer consecrates the space; praise and worship sets the atmosphere; the Word fills this atmosphere with divinely inspired content; the altar call brings preacher and congregant together so that the spiritual exigencies brought to light by

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68 Although the practices of reading announcements and welcoming visitors are not at all unique to black churches, Cheryl Sanders claims that these practices have historically played an especially significant role in African American institutions. She writes, “At first glance, reading announcements and welcoming visitors appear to be mundane matters of marginal importance to the real business of worship. However, the announcements are an important sign of the role of the black church as a critical forum for sharing information concerning both religious and secular events, and they may bear an implicit moral approval or ecclesiastical endorsement of outside activities. The announcements provide a means for the church to proclaim that particular occurrences and accomplishments—personal, social, cultural, and political—merit the attention and affirmation of the community.” Sanders, *Saints in Exile*, 69. She goes on to claim that the welcoming of visitors also has important political and cultural significance, saying that “in a nation whose history includes the racist exclusion of African Americans from virtually all social institutions, including Christian churches, welcoming and recognizing each visitor by name can be a countercultural act that affirms the oneness of all humanity before God” (69). For most of Faith Assembly’s existence, the welcoming of visitors was done during praise and worship, though, after Bishop McKenzie’s death in the fall of 2012, it has more commonly been done during the announcements at the conclusion of the service.
the Word can be addressed through prayer; the offering sacrificially confirms God’s promises; the announcements reaffirm the bonds of community; and the benediction provides closure. Each segment relies on the success of the previous one to be carried out effectively. Along the way, ecstatic structures emerge, strengthening believers’ faith in the active work of the Holy Spirit.

But why do churchgoers gather each week to enact this ritual? This is a fundamental question that guides my work throughout this dissertation. It is the kind of question for which there can never be a simple cut-and-dried answer—individual believers each have individual reasons, and these reasons remain subject to revision and change over time. I have already touched on some of the broader reasons that most churchgoers seem to share. Most obviously, perhaps, churchgoers gather to affirm community, culture, and belief. Believers also, however, put great emphasis on the efficacy of worship. They worship to accomplish particular ends. Some of the most commonly cited are healing and deliverance, but, in general, the goals of worship could fit under the broad category of “transformation.” Believers stress that they do not seek such transformation simply out of self-interested motives. They commonly claim to owe God worship despite what it may, or may not, accomplish. But Bishop McKenzie often claimed that in “real worship” something is inevitably transacted. Rarely a Sunday passed when he did not sing a few bars of “You Won’t Leave Here Like You Came” during the course of his message. If one did not have a transformative experience of giving and receiving, McKenzie said, one was not really worshipping.

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69 “You Won’t Leave Here Like You Came in Jesus Name” was written and originally recorded by Jimmy Swaggart. The song was made popular among African American’s by Bishop G.E. Patterson, the longstanding Presiding Bishop of the Church of God in Christ, the largest black Pentecostal denomination.
What one receives through worship, however—and this is a key point—is not necessarily salvation. Instead, what one receives is relevant to this life. Salvation, according to those at Faith Assembly, is a one-shot deal. Once one has confessed Jesus Christ as savior, one is saved. For believers at Faith Assembly there is technically no need to come to church each week to remain saved, and, moreover, Pastor McKenzie claims unequivocally that one who confesses Jesus as her savior seconds before she dies is guaranteed salvation just as much as—perhaps more than—one who has been saved for years. Sunday morning worship, then, is not primarily about heaven and hell. It is about living in this world. Faith Assembly’s worship is perhaps best conceived as a kind of practice for life. Believers come to church for a spiritual and practical training that forms them to be able to live more empowered lives; lives in which they can maximize well-being (for themselves and others), and be able to act effectively and efficiently in the face of hardship. Music and dance are key parts of this process of training and formation. Believers stress the ways in which these activities are intertwined with the negotiation of life’s joys and challenges to a much greater extent than they talk about them as reflections or expressions of doctrine or theology. Worshiping through dance and music is part of a basic attempt to live good and live right. The ways that worship negotiates these moral and ethical dimensions are shaped less by denominational and theological dictates, I contend, than by what I have termed the Spirit-filled imagination.

**The Spirit-Filled Imagination**

In general, the Spirit-filled imagination is a base of intellectual and embodied knowledge that both guides and grows out of the relationship between believers and God. It is a kind of underlying force behind what worshipers do and value, both inside and outside of church. Because the term “imagination” indexes several different meanings which interact in
dynamic ways, it is particularly potent in describing this complex idea. These indexed meanings come both from academic literature and the Faith Assembly community.

Imagination evokes the idea of the imaginary that has had wide resonance in academic conversations, particularly in sociology. Like Canadian sociologist Charles Taylor’s claims about the “social imaginary,” the Spirit-filled imagination “is not a set of ideas,” but instead is “what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a [community].” Additionally, scholarship inquiring into the social imaginary is fundamentally concerned with the relationship between subject and collective. Similarly, the Spirit-filled imagination is not something that merely exists inside an individual, but something that emerges in the relationship between believers, and between believers and the Holy Spirit. In this way, it also relates to theologian Amos Yong’s idea of the “pneumatological imagination,” which involves the interactions of “Spirit, word, and community,” and is concerned with the “pragmatic, affective, and spiritual effects of the Holy Spirit on the transformation of God’s people.”

Furthermore, the relationship between the terms “image” and “imagination” are important to the way I understand the Spirit-filled imagination. The biblical concept of man being created in the image of God is emphasized by Pastor and Bishop McKenzie at Faith

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71 Charles Taylor, “Modern Social Imaginaries,” Public Culture 14/1 (Winter, 2002), 91. I have replaced Taylor’s word “society” with “community,” because I am concerned with a much smaller group of people.

72 See Yong, Spirit-Word-Community. The quotation comes from theologian Wolfgang Vondey’s discussion of Yong’s concept in Vondey, Beyond Pentecostalism: The Crisis of Global Christianity and the Renewal of the Theological Agenda (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 39.
Assembly. If Christians live lives characterized by awareness that they are created in God’s image, the McKenzies say, then they are continually working to transform into versions of themselves that are more God-like. For example, Pastor McKenzie preached on June 10, 2012,

> See, when you get in Christ,  
> You’re already who God called you to be,  
> But you’ve got to work out the transformation in your mind to [become] who God called you to be…  
> He created you in the image of Himself,  
> He made you to do the things that He does, to have the heart that He has, to think like Him, to act like Him. Praise God?

The process McKenzie describes is brought out in the relationship between “image” and “imagination.” Broken into its constituent parts—“image” plus the suffixes “–ine” (relating to) and “–ation” (action or process)—imagination refers to processes related to an image. So the Spirit-filled imagination, then, refers to the processes related to the ways that believers strive to become more like the image of God; the image in which they understand themselves to be created.

My use of the term imagination also relates directly to terminology used in Faith Assembly’s outreach efforts. Shortly before Bishop Leroy McKenzie passed away in October of 2012, leaders at Faith Assembly began adding the subtitle “The New Church” to the church’s name. Pastor Mary McKenzie also started using a new catchphrase, welcoming worshipers to “The New Church, where we do it BIG—Believe, Imagine, Grow!” A few months after Bishop McKenzie passed away, they redesigned their website homepage to emphasize the “New Church” and the “BIG” catchphrase.

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73 This concept, often referred to in theological discourse with the Latin term *imago Dei*, comes from Genesis 1:27—“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them”—and several New Testament scriptures that refer back to the Genesis account.
With this rhetoric, leaders at Faith Assembly highlight both the idea of being remade in God’s image (as in Colossians 3:10: “[putting] on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him”), and the role of imagination in that process. In this way, the church emphasizes imagination not so much in the sense of being able to form mental images that do not respond to reality, but more in the sense of “the mind’s creativity and resourcefulness in using and inventing images, analogies, etc.;” or “creative ability; the ability to confront and deal with a problem.” Viewed in this light, the Spirit-filled imagination is crucial to the process through which believers at Faith Assembly engage in religious practice as a means through which to negotiate and overcome the struggles of modern existence.

This chapter does not rigidly define the concept of the Spirit-filled imagination, but attempts to clarify it through a discussion of key themes that it comprises. I discuss seven concepts that are pervasive at Faith Assembly. I do not want to imply that these seven are the

only possible concepts that could be included on the list, but based on my interactions with leaders and congregants at the church these have emerged as the most significant, and discussing them should provide a full and vivid picture of the Spirit-filled imagination. Concepts like “favor” and “joy” are major themes at Faith Assembly, but are not explicitly addressed here. They are, however, contained in, or somehow indexed by, the seven themes that the chapter does discuss. And this fact highlights the extent to which my enumeration of seven concepts is a heuristic strategy. These themes all overlap, intertwine, merge, or variously interact according to context and circumstance. The Spirit-filled imagination is what both feeds and is shaped by these complex interactions.

The seven themes are: 1) faith, 2) one accord, 3) atmosphere, 4) anointing, 5) transformation, 6) destiny, and 7) power. Ideally for Spirit-filled believers, all of their actions are characterized by these concepts. The “atmosphere of their life” is “set” or “tuned to God;” their steps are always “walking out” their destiny; every one of their decisions is made “in faith;” and so on.\(^\text{75}\) Thus, it is not only in worship that the Spirit-filled imagination has significance. Based on my conversations with several churchgoers, Bishop McKenzie, and the content of his and Pastor McKenzie’s preached messages, however, I understand worship services to be particularly important as a means through which believers exercise the Spirit-filled imagination. Analogous to the way one can build one’s physical strength by regularly going to the gym and following a structured exercise regimen, believers can build their Spirit-filled imaginations by “working out” in church services. Thinking about the Spirit-filled imagination as something that is exercised in the context of worship, we can understand the list of seven concepts to be both progressive—faith is the foundation and

\(^\text{75}\)These ideas are quoted or paraphrased from Bishop McKenzie’s preached messages.
power the ultimate goal—and cyclical—having achieved power one returns to faith to continue strengthening the Spirit-filled imagination.

In a given worship service, the spiritual exercise regimen might unfold like this: One enters the service with faith—an unwavering belief in things unseen (such as, most obviously, God). Building on the prerequisite of faith, one works—usually through musical practice—to establish a unified focus on God—one accord—with fellow believers. As one accord emerges, one perceives new horizons in the collective experiential environment; there is a “setting” or a “shifting” of the atmosphere. When the atmosphere is set, the anointing—the operation of God’s immanent presence on earth—can “flow.” Most believers maintain that the most concentrated flow of the anointing comes through the Word, or the preached message. As the anointing flows, it enacts transformation—a complete change accomplished through the “renewing of your mind.”

76 The most commonly cited biblical definition of faith at Faith Assembly is Hebrews 11:1: “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” Bishop McKenzie often intoned the first two words of this scripture as a single word—“nowfaith”—in order to emphasize his belief in the perpetually present need for faith. The time to have faith, he suggested, was not sometime in the past or the future, but right now.

77 African American pentecostals take the concept primarily from the book of Acts, especially Acts 2:1-2: “And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting.” See also Philippians 2:2.

78 The terminology of “atmosphere” is related to the fact that metaphors of weather phenomena are used in the bible to describe worship in moments of intense spiritual presence. God comes as a “rushing mighty wind” in Acts 2:2, for example, and 2 Chronicles 5:13-14 describes holy presence as a “cloud” that “filled the house of God.”

79 The word anointing is used throughout much of the Old Testament to refer to the physical act of placing oil on another as part of a ritual of consecration or the conferral of authority. It takes on a more metaphorical significance in the New Testament. Acts 10:38, for example, speaks of how “God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Ghost and with power.” While I have occasionally seen oil used in African American pentecostal services, it is the metaphorical meaning of this term that has the most resonance. In general, any person, place, thing, or idea that is understood to be under the direct influence of the Holy Spirit is said to be “anointed.”

80 Romans 12:2: “And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.”
deliverance, and so on, are offered. With a transformed mind one gains perspective on the present moment, recognizing it as an inevitable waypoint on the path toward an ultimate Spirit-led goal—destiny—a path along which “all things work together for good.” With this new revelation of destiny, one’s relationship with God is strengthened—one is “increased in anointing,” or knowledge, or wisdom, or humility, or love, or whatever one needs to move toward an ideally empowered existence where one can “do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” Reaching this new level of spiritual power one can now ostensibly leave church with a wider and firmer foundation of faith.

The preceding discussion is the outline of an ideal type meant to introduce the concept of the Spirit-filled imagination and show how its components might productively work together during the spiritual “work out” of a worship service. If we began to analyze specific services, however, we would find as many variations on this ideal type as there were services in our sample set, and, moreover, as many different perceptions of these variations as there were people in each service. So, having presented the “flow-chart” relationships between these concepts, I want to now discuss each of them in turn. Some of these discussions consider not only the significance of the given concept at Faith Assembly, but also examine closely related or analogous concepts that have been the focus of various scholarly conversations. By drawing these parallels, this chapter aims to both participate in the “discursive idioms” of the church community and consider the ways that an exploration of the Spirit-filled imagination can facilitate a better understanding of particular scholarly

81 Romans 8:28: “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.”

82 Philippians 4:13: “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.”
This strategy is shaped by my experiences of simultaneously being a scholar and a church musician. To be successful as a church musician I had to gain a level of facility with the Spirit-filled imagination. Throughout that process, however, I felt that my understanding of Spirit-filled concepts was thoroughly intertwined with my participation in academia and vice versa. Thus, this dissertation inevitably stands as a pivot or a mediator between these two discourse communities.

Faith

Dressed impeccably in a brightly colored suit, Pastor Garry Mitchell stands in front of the congregation at Faith Assembly, microphone in hand, and speaks exuberantly.

*Pastor Garry:* Saints of God, once again we welcome you to Faith Assembly Christian Center where we walk by…

*Congregation:* Faith!

*Pastor Garry:* And not by…

*Congregation:* Sight!

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83 Here I am referencing Michael Jackson who claims that rather than employing familiar metaphors from academia to “explain” the findings of ethnographic research it is often “more edifying to use and extend indigenous metaphors in novel ways, participating in rather than subverting the discursive idioms to which our researches introduce us.” See Jackson, *Lifeworlds: Essays in Existential Anthropology* (University of Chicago Press, 2012), 89.

There are often, however, fundamental ontological differences in the concepts employed by scholars and Spirit-filled Christians. For Faith Assembly’s members what ultimately gives meaning to the concepts comprised by the Spirit-filled imagination is their belief in an omnipotent monotheistic God. The claims of scholars, in contrast, rest on an ontological foundation of presuppositions tacitly and/or explicitly agreed upon by their discipline. While there is certainly a contingent of scholars who believe in some divine power as the ultimate source of meaning, the vast majority of these do not risk their ability to participate in disciplinary discourse by invoking it explanatorily. But neither pentecostals nor academics need necessarily embrace the ontological foundations of the other in order for their concepts to be mutually illuminating. My claim is that key terms of the Spirit-filled imagination—“atmosphere,” “anointing,” “destiny,” and so on—index similar pragmatic consequences to particular terms in academia. While these discourse communities are separated by ontological distinctions, they are brought together by the fact that they are trying to better understand, or better cope with, similar challenges of human existence.

84 The work of Melvin Butler discusses a similar mutually beneficial relationship between discourse communities—in Butler’s case, Pentecostalism and ethnomusicology. See Butler, “Songs of Pentecost: Experiencing Music, Transcendence, and Identity in Jamaica and Haiti,” PhD diss. (New York University, 2005). I mentioned earlier Butler’s claim about his conversations with a pastor in Jamaica: “While I realized that our discussions would contribute greatly to my dissertation project,” he writes, “it was as much my desire to grow spiritually that compelled me to continue listening and learning” (119).
For much of the church’s existence, this call and response has been a weekly ritual at Faith Assembly. Led by Pastor Garry, who acts as Master of Ceremonies for most Sunday services, the congregation collectively declares the Apostle Paul’s parenthetical statement from his second letter to the Corinthians: “(For we walk by faith, not by sight).” The scripture is also printed in large letters on the clear plastic lectern from which the Word is preached each week. It is prominently displayed at the top of the church’s website and included on all of their newsletters and promotional materials. The church thus embraces this scripture as the encapsulation of their religious philosophy.

Bishop and Pastor McKenzie have built their ministry around this scripture because they believe that faith is the very foundation of life itself. Even when one cannot see any reward, any meaning, any sign that there may be freedom from struggle, or anything good at all, one can still “walk by faith.” Faith is what one has when everything else is gone, or as Bishop McKenzie preached on April 3, 2011, repeating a common motif of his, “You may not have a dime in your pocket, but what makes a difference in your life is how much faith you’ve got.” But in order to have faith, the believer must perceive “as real fact what is not revealed to the senses.” In his preached messages and in conversations with me, Bishop McKenzie repeatedly stressed his belief that reality is not as it appears; that what our minds and eyes seem to tell us is always partial, incomplete, a mere trace of some larger truth. But it is the Christian’s responsibility, he claimed, to take actions founded on the assurance that that a higher order is in fact in place. This assurance is not easy to come by, however, because often there is no perceptual evidence on which it can be based. Given that faith is

\[ ^{85} \text{2 Corinthians 5:6-8: “Therefore we are always confident, knowing that, whilst we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord: (For we walk by faith, not by sight:) We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord.”} \]

\[ ^{86} \text{Taken from Hebrews 11:1 as it appears in the Amplified Bible.} \]
simultaneously essential for life and precarious, it remains a perpetual challenge for the believer, the McKenzies claim. It is repeatedly “tested and tried” by God, and simultaneously “attacked” by the devil. The devil knows, the McKenzies say, that if he can compromise faith—the foundation of life—then his three desires—to steal, kill, and destroy—can be easily fulfilled. ⁸⁷ Thus, God must test and try believers—just as He did when He ask Abraham to kill his son Isaac—in order to fortify faith against attacks from “the enemy.”

For believers, conceiving of faith as a kind of battleground or site of continuous struggle goes a long way in accounting for the great challenges and apparent absurdities of life. Every time believers successfully endure a trying of their faith, the McKenzies say, they are “increased in faith,” which means that their subsequent trials will be even more difficult. The ideal of walking “by faith and not by sight,” then, is to be undaunted by obstacles that look like they are impossible to overcome. Pastor McKenzie repeatedly reminds churchgoers to “count it all joy” when life becomes unbearable or incomprehensible.⁸⁸ “God puts impossible situations in your life,” she preached in August of 2012, “so He can reveal Himself. So there won’t be a doubt in your mind who it was that brought you out. Because you know that situation was impossible for you. [dramatic pause] But God.”

Pastor McKenzie thus claims that believers’ lives are characterized by perpetual transactions of faith; God creates situations that require people to expend faith in order to increase their faith. Along with many other African American pentecostal leaders, Pastor McKenzie often metaphorically refers to faith as the “currency of the kingdom.”⁸⁹ She claims

⁸⁷John 10:10: “The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy…”

⁸⁸James 1: 2-3: “My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience.”

⁸⁹During a preached message on October 9, 2011, for example, Pastor McKenzie strung together several common Spirit-filled assertions about faith, “The just shall live by faith. Without faith it is impossible to please
that faith, like currency, must be earned. Just as a “natural” job provides a steady stream of income, Pastor McKenzie says that believers should steadily receive faith by working at their “spiritual job:” reading scripture, praying, fasting, and committing to the practical and spiritual needs of the church. But these activities, like an hourly wage job, can only take believers so far. “You have to spend money to make money” instructs the business world truism, and for those like Pastor McKenzie who embrace the faith-as-currency metaphor, one has to “step out on faith” in order to increase in faith. The McKenzies have taught their congregants that God honors bold investments of faith, such as Bishop McKenzie’s purchasing and remodeling a church building before he had been “elevated to Bishop” (as evidenced in the Faith Assembly creation story). Such investments, of course, can be risky, so one has to be sure, Bishop McKenzie teaches, that one has heard from God. “You have to listen, listen, listen,” he preached on May 6, 2012, “to the voice of the Lord. Not the Bishop. Not the Pastor. Not everybody else. The voice of the Lord. Tell somebody, ‘I got to learn how to hear God.”’ For those operating in the Spirit-filled imagination, this is how faith comes—by hearing. And this is why effective worship is so important for them, because, they say, it is often through worship that God’s voice becomes audible.

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90 The currency metaphor enters the Spirit-filled imagination partially through the ideology of the Word of Faith movement. Prominent leaders of this movement have provoked considerable controversy by teaching that through “speaking faith” humans can become “little ‘g’ gods” with the power to use words to “make things manifest,” just as big “G” God did in Genesis when He spoke the world into existence. (See Jonathan Walton’s discussion of Creflo Dollar’s ministry in Walton, Watch This!, 145-166; see especially page 150). In a message preached on April 15, 2012, Bishop McKenzie claimed that this is “one of the most dangerous ideas out there.” He went on to explain that he did not feel this way because it was untrue or biblically unsound, but because the potential for misuse was too great. This is one more example of the kind of doctrinal tensions that congregants at Faith Assembly must negotiate; even if McKenzie rhetorically shuns the little-‘g’ gods idea as a guide for practice, he nevertheless embraces its veracity, and the idea still clearly remains present and influential at the church.
One Accord

Speaking to members of the Praise Team before rehearsal one Thursday night, Pastor Wade, the minister of music, said,

It has always been said in church [*mocking hyper-excited voice*] “come on, ya’ll, let’s get on one accord!”
And for years I couldn’t figure out how to get on one accord.
I couldn’t figure it out.
How can you get all these minds on one accord?
* [*dramatic pause, as if waiting for the answer*]
You have to think on the same thing.
The reason we’re here is for Christ…
When we get up there, yes we want everyone to get delivered, we want miracles to happen, we want all that great stuff, that’s wonderful.
But we have to know how to get there.
Our mind has to be on *Christ*;
And Him magnified.91

Pastor Wade’s pep talk gently pokes fun at how pervasive the notion of one accord is in the rhetoric of Spirit-filled believers. At the same time, however, it highlights both the significance that the concept has for this community and the challenges in reaching such a state. Ultimately, the minister of music suggests, one accord is about a kind of shared underlying awareness. Whatever the congregation happens to be doing—singing, dancing, listening quietly—each congregant should be doing it with his or her mind “stayed on Jesus,” as the words of one well-known spiritual put it. But this is not a simple task. It involves a delicate balancing act where each believer is focused on praising Jesus, but not overly concerned with the results that this praise might bring. For Christians in some traditions, it may be axiomatic that praising Jesus is its own reward and, therefore, should not be carried out with a focus on specific results. African American Spirit-filled believers, however, are concerned with the results of worship. In general, they believe in “crying out to God” with specific requests, and embrace the idea that God is present in, and fundamentally concerned

91Pastor Wade Sams, FACC, January 17, 2013
with, the “situations and circumstances” of everyday life; and that if Jesus is offered praise and worship then he will “come see about me.” But, importantly, the initial process of coming together on one accord is not, as Pastor Wade suggests, the time to focus on these specific desires. He highlights this when he says, “yes we want everyone to get delivered, we want miracles to happen, we want all that great stuff…But we have to know how to get there.” In other words he is claiming that, yes, people have specific desires, and, yes, the church hopes that those are fulfilled, but it is not those desires that unify the people. One accord must emerge on a register prior to such specific desires.

If a believer tunes her awareness to this prior register, then individual ego—or “the flesh,” as Pastor Mary McKenzie is more apt to call it—is deemphasized so that a powerful group dynamic can emerge. Earlier in his pep talk Pastor Wade said that Praise Team members should be “tapped in” to the extent that “we ain’t worried about what the person next to us is doing because we’re in a zone, we’re caught up.” But the ego is not to be completely done away with. Pastor Wade continued by cautioning, “Now I’m not saying that you’re so caught up that you’re not alert to what’s going on around you, and that you don’t know what your job is; but you’re in the Spirit enough that you can see the devil coming.”

Coming together on one accord, then, requires extremely delicate poise in both thought and action. Each believer must be tuned to thoughts of Christ, but not overwhelmed in reverence; acting deliberately as an individual, but aware of the group dynamic. When they achieve this balance, what emerges is, as Glenn Hinson writes, “something far deeper than a simple state of harmony.” Hinson continues, “When the saints speak of ‘coming to accord,’ they mean recreating in spirit and mood the focused reverence that prevailed among the apostles on the
day of Pentecost.” Thus, for believers, one accord has powerful experiential and historical dimensions. When one accord prevails among believers it explicitly connects them to the state experienced by the first century Christians just before the moment when God’s Spirit was poured out “upon all flesh.” And this is another important part of the balancing act of achieving one accord; worshipers strive to maintain awareness of the biblical past, while simultaneously seeking to be fully present in the present.

An illuminative analogue to this process of coming together on one accord is found in the scholarship on group improvisation. In a section on “group creativity” in his book Sync or Swarm: Improvising Music in a Complex Age, David Borgo cites drama instructor Keith Johnstone’s comments about improvisation: “Bad improvisers block action, often with a high degree of skill. Good improvisers develop action.” Similarly, when Spirit-filled believers talk about finding one accord through worship they often speak of “letting God use you;” or employ metaphors of “zone” (see Pastor Wade’s comments above) and “flow.” Borgo draws on the work of George Lewis to claim that, by allowing oneself to “develop action” rather than “block action,” one can articulate one’s own perspective while remaining aware of the group dynamic, ensuring that others are able to do so as well. Achieving one accord

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92 Hinson, Fire in My Bones, 89.
93 Acts 2:17.
94 David Borgo, Sync or Swarm: Improvising Music in a Complex Age (New York: Continuum, 2005), 185. The quote comes from Johnstone, IMPRO: Improvisation and the Theater (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1979), 95.
for Spirit-filled believers, like effective group creativity in jazz improvisation, relies on establishing and maintaining a delicate balance between “one and one another.”

Spirit-filled believers extend the idea of one accord to refer to an optimal group dynamic in any situation in life where people must work together. When used in this manner, the concept frequently operates in conjunction with the word “team,” another example of the conflation of religious and business world concepts that is so common in the milieu of contemporary pentecostalism. Bishop McKenzie, for example, regularly admonished the musicians and the sound engineers at Faith Assembly to “work together as a team on one accord.” His directive was aimed primarily at getting these groups to cooperate in the practical tasks of maintaining equipment, doing soundchecks, and so on. In this case, the goal of one accord was not an intense Spirit-filled experience, but a congenial, productive, and mutually beneficial working relationship between two groups of people. In a similar vein, Pastor Mary McKenzie has often preached about the necessity for one accord in family relationships. According to some Spirit-filled Christians, one accord can also function on the level of social and political action. One member of Faith Assembly, a spoken word poet whose compositions often celebrate black identity, talks about how one accord was a key element of the success of demonstrations and marches during the Civil Rights Era.

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98 Pastor Mary McKenzie used a similar phrasing in her December 2, 2012 prayer for the musicians that I cited in the beginning of the Introduction. She told us that “if you don’t work together and be a team on one accord, God said that, ‘You will deal with Me.’”

99 Of course, McKenzie was interested in this practical relationship because its relative function or dysfunction would ultimately help or hinder the seeking of intense Spirit-filled experience in worship. In other words, the desire for one accord on a more practical level is intertwined with the desire for the state on a more spiritual level.
In some sense, one accord can be understood as a culturally and religiously specific instantiation of the concept of communitas that figures prominently in the work of anthropologists Victor and Edith Turner.\textsuperscript{100} Communitas is a “modality of social relationship.”\textsuperscript{101} Its characteristics “show it to be almost beyond strict definition, with almost endless variations…[but it] has to do with the sense felt by a group of people when their life together takes on full meaning.”\textsuperscript{102} In fact, Edith Turner explicitly notes the “singing in the Spirit” that occurs in “Pentecostal and charismatic churches” as an example of communitas.\textsuperscript{103} Invoking communitas, however, does not “explain” one accord, or even necessarily illuminate the concept beyond the previously cited words of Pastor Wade and the McKenzies. But noting the affinity of the two concepts shows the extent to which prominent anthropologists and Spirit-filled believers are both invested in grappling with similar human phenomena. Conversations about communitas, one accord, or group creativity in jazz improvisation all interrogate fundamental questions about how humans can best be together with others. When are actions taken in a communal context most efficacious and egalitarian? How do we best create the conditions for this kind of maximally beneficial interaction? Discussing one accord in the local and circumscribed context of worship at Faith Assembly, will, I hope, shed light on these broader existential questions about human interaction.

\textit{Atmosphere}


\textsuperscript{101}Victor Turner, \textit{The Ritual Process}, 96.

\textsuperscript{102}Edith Turner, \textit{Communitas}, 1.

\textsuperscript{103}Ibid., 5.
In the Introduction, I defined atmosphere as a kind of experiential substrate that both encourages and reflects a particular mode of devotion. In this sense, virtually all religious rituals are concerned with “setting an atmosphere.” Even if we limit our purview only to Christian practices, we see church and denominational institutions deeply invested in creating atmosphere through architecture, décor, lighting, raiment, music, and so on. Whether we are talking about Catholics in an ancient European cathedral or Spirit-filled Protestants in a former nightclub, a major ingredient in worship is the atmosphere that emerges as a result of the dynamic relationship between place and human perception.

What sets the concept of atmosphere apart in the Spirit-filled imagination is: 1) its variability, 2) the extent to which congregants bear responsibility for creating the atmosphere, and 3) the extension of the concept to areas of life outside of worship rituals. Believers at Faith Assembly speak of a wide range of atmospheres. They might describe a service characterized by reverence and intense moments of devotion as having “an atmosphere of worship.” Part of a service characterized by energetic physical involvement might be described as having an “atmosphere of praise.” Sometimes the word is used without qualification as a general statement of approval, “there was just an atmosphere in that service!” It can also have negative connotations as in “an atmosphere of heaviness.” On March 11, 2011, Pastor Mary McKenzie declared that she changed the scriptures on which she was going to base her message at the last minute because she discerned “something in the atmosphere”—the connotation was that there was that the needs present in the room caused the Holy Spirit to redirect her.

Believers consider the atmosphere to be a gauge of the level of devotion, enthusiasm, and spiritual sincerity of those gathered. They very often speak of a collective process of
shaping the atmosphere—congregants work together to “shift” or “set” the atmosphere. Faith Assembly’s booming sound system, performance venue-style setup, and theater-style lighting all play into this process. But it is quite common for the MC or preacher to claim that these are merely aids—that sound and lights may help one “get excited” or “get into” the service, but that these things are powerless to create an “anointed atmosphere;” only devoted, intentional, fervent actions carried out by faithful believers can do that. Thus, during the praise and worship portion of each service the MC will exhort worshippers to: “Clap your hands and give God some praise;” “Help usher in His presence;” “Get excited about what God’s going to do in your life;” “Tell somebody just one thing God has done for you this week;” “Lift your hands, cry out, give him some real praise;” “Close your eyes in worship;” “Lift those hands and reverence your God;” and so on. Although such instructions emphasize that the atmosphere is a product of believers’ actions rather than the physical characteristics of the worship space, there is an interesting dynamic in which the rhetoric of this kind of encouragement frequently references “this place” or “the building.” Rather than simply instructing believers to “Give God some glory,” the MC or preacher will often say “Give God some glory in this place;” or “I need two or three of you to start shouting in this place;” or “We welcome you into the building today, God.” The physical location in which a service is happening is almost always rhetorically present in African American Spirit-filled worship. In this way, believers foreground an understanding of place that resonates with philosopher Edward Casey’s assertion that “places not only are, they happen.” When

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104 This usage has been canonized by popular contemporary gospel recordings from Kurt Carr’s “Set the Atmosphere” (2000) to Jason Nelson’s “Shifting the Atmosphere” (2011).
105 These are all quotes from Pastor Garry Mitchell acting as MC.
believers act with the intent of setting the atmosphere—working to “give God some glory in this place” and to “welcome [God] into the building”—they are making place happen. In other words, the process of setting the atmosphere is a kind of collective declaration that Faith Assembly is not just a building where people come to worship, but is a holy place.¹⁰⁷

For believers at Faith Assembly, the concept of atmosphere and the rhetoric of place also extend beyond the worship service. On March 20, 2011, for example, Bishop McKenzie asks the congregation to repeat after him: “I am anointed to change the atmosphere in my life.” These words suggest both that one’s life is characterized by a particular atmosphere and that one can take actions to change that atmosphere, just as one would shift the atmosphere in a worship service. The McKenzies have frequently spoken about one’s “place in God.”¹⁰⁸ And because one’s place in God, according to Pastor McKenzie, is always subject to “the seasons of God,” the atmosphere around this place goes through cycles. When one finds oneself in “a dry place,” McKenzie says, it is often only a sign that God is “setting something up for you in the atmosphere,” preparing to bring the life-giving rain.¹⁰⁹

If we step back and take a broader perspective, we might say that the concept of atmosphere is fundamentally about how people achieve a delicate experiential state that helps them best achieve the goals at hand. There has to be a particular atmosphere in a classroom in order for people to learn; in the court room in order for people to believe in justice and the

¹⁰⁶Edward S. Casey, “How to Get from Space to Place in a fairly Short Stretch of Time: Phenomenological Prolegomena,” in Senses of Place, eds. Keith Basso and Steven Feld, (Santa Fe, NM: Distributed by the University of Washington Press, 1996), 27 (emphasis in original).

¹⁰⁷This is particularly important for churchgoers given that Faith Assembly’s church building is a repurposed nightclub. Such an emphasis on place also keeps Bishop McKenzie’s biography present in the minds of congregants—his bold “stepping out on faith” to acquire the building that “God had placed in his spirit” (see Faith Assembly’s creation story at the beginning of this chapter).

¹⁰⁸For example, on October 9, 2011, Pastor McKenzie said, “If you’re at the same place in God that you were last week, you’re not increasing in knowledge.”

¹⁰⁹Pastor Mary McKenzie, FACC, April 10, 2011.
rule of law; at the dinner table in order for a family to feel connected. In a similar fashion, the Spirit-filled imagination seeks atmospheres that help achieve the goals of worship and maximize well-being in people’s lives more generally. These atmospheres emerge out of a thorough awareness of emplaced bodies; out of, to draw from Steven Feld, “the kinesthesia and sonesthesia” of place.\textsuperscript{110} When Spirit-filled believers set the atmosphere, they stir up and re-charge place, whether that place is a church building or a “place” in their lives. They are not content to merely exist in a place, but instead work to make place happen.

\textit{The Anointing}

“The gospel has got to be revealed,” preached Bishop McKenzie on October 9, 2011,

If it ain’t revealed, you ain’t going to get it…
[The] anointing will translate it right directly into your spirit.
It’s just like drugs. It’ll mainline you.
You can’t skin pop this.
You can’t smoke this in a pipe.
It hits you \textit{mainline}.
And if it don’t come mainline, it won’t come in any line.

Dealing with a similar subject on January 9, 2011, Pastor Mary McKenzie claimed,

If I have no revelation of what I’m preachin’, there is no anointing.
Let me say that again.
Because a lot of times we’re preaching a lot of stuff that we heard somebody else say, but there ain’t no anointing in it because we have no revelation of what God is saying.

These quotes begin to show both the importance and the complexity of the concept of anointing at Faith Assembly. Revelation—or direct God-given understanding—is essential to grasp the gospel, Bishop McKenzie says, but it only comes by the anointing. At the same time, in order to be anointed, Pastor McKenzie claims, preaching has to proceed from a

foundation of revelation. The McKenzies teach that the anointing is indispensable; true knowledge of God and relationship with God is impossible without it.

In general, Spirit-filled believers claim that something is anointed—whether it be a person, a song, a preached message, an atmosphere—when the Holy Spirit is actively present within it. “Actively” is a key word here, because the Holy Spirit is present in all of creation according to Spirit-filled Christians. But in order for something to be anointed it has to be characterized by a concentrated, action-directed form of this presence. Even still, there are different levels of this active presence. At the risk of oversimplifying, there are two basic modes of the anointing that Spirit-filled believers recognize—what we might call the latent and the active. Churchgoers at Faith Assembly, for example, will describe someone whose life is characterized by an always-present latent anointing as “an anointed woman of God.” This person has received the baptism of the Holy Ghost and generally leads what believers perceive as a Holy Spirit-filled and Holy Spirit-led life. Every action she undertakes, however, is not characterized by the experience of intense spiritual manifestation. At times, though, her latent anointing will become active, or “stirred up” as churchgoers often say. During these times—perhaps when singing, for example—she will “flow in the anointing,” channeling the Holy Spirit’s presence in a particularly potent manner and becoming a direct mouthpiece for God. This relationship between latent and active forms of the anointing figures prominently in the Spirit-filled imagination. Believers who have received the baptism of the Holy Ghost claim that this initial spiritual infilling creates the capacity for future moments of intensified infilling.

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In the milieu of Faith Assembly where the church’s leaders often emphasize personal success along the lines of Bishop McKenzie’s business world-inspired model of the 4 Es, people frequently use the word anointing as a synonym for “personal calling” or “gift.” Take for example the opening of the following poem written and performed by Sister Rhachel, a member of Faith Assembly who regularly dances and performs poetry at the church. Her piece was entitled “Anointed” and she read it on June 5, 2011. Oozing confidence she declared,

I know my calling  
Plain and simple, as sure as one can be  
I’m anointed  
Rest assured  
I’ve been chosen, called, and appointed  
I’m His vessel

The understanding of anointing as a divine appointment derives from Old Testament descriptions of the ritual application of oil to the heads of kings and prophets as a consecration of their special calling. Members at Faith Assembly symbolically extend this idea to refer to God’s calling of believers to their individual destinies. When people accept their divine callings—whatever they may be: preaching, raising a family, fixing cars, teaching, etc.—they are anointed by God. Thus the concept of the anointing is intimately intertwined both with intense individual experience of the divine and the most practical of concerns. For Spirit-filled believers, what one does on a day to day basis should be a manifestation of that person’s particular anointing. Bishop McKenzie frequently claimed that many people experience great dissonance in their life because they are anointed to do one thing but choose to do something else. Just as frequently, however, he claimed that when one accepts one’s calling, “the enemy” (the forces of Satan) will attack with full force. Spirit-

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112 See, for example, 1 Samuel 16:13, which describes the anointing of David.
filled believers facing trouble, uncertainty, hardship, and so on must negotiate between these ideas. Are they, in fact, not “walking in their anointing?” Or are they simply being attacked by Satan because of their anointing? These questions return one to the idea of divine revelation. Only the Spirit, believers say, can reveal the answer to this quandary; one needs the anointing to walk in the anointing. In other words, intense individual experience of the Holy Spirit—and the revelations that can come through these encounters—are essential to dealing with the practical challenges of life.

*Transformation*

Worship at Faith Assembly is saturated with the idea that believers can become something fundamentally different than what they were, or what they are. Such a notion is pervasive in the Judeo-Christian scriptures, exemplified in the many biblical characters who received new names from God, and therefore new identities (for example: Abram/Abraham, Sarai/Sarah, Jacob/Israel, and Saul/Paul). For African American believers—particularly those at a church like Faith Assembly who occupy what theologian Jonathan Walton has called the “nebulous category between the working and middle class”113—transformation is perhaps an especially appealing concept because of their desire to move beyond the injustices and hardships of the past. Moreover, driven by the powerful influence of television ministries like those of TD Jakes and Paula White, emotional healing has become a major theme among contemporary African American pentecostals. The promise of being spiritually recreated as a “new creature,” free from past traumas of substance abuse, sexual abuse, violence, absent parents, poverty, and so on, resonates powerfully for believers at Faith Assembly and similar

They embrace the idea that for them—as for Saul, the terrorizing persecutor of Christians who encountered a blinding light on the road to Damascus and was transformed into Paul, the primary author of the New Testament scriptures—even the most heinous past is not an impediment to a spiritually illustrious future.

But how does transformation come? Bishop McKenzie says,

> Every now and again God’s got to take you through some stuff that you don’t really understand. The only thing you know is that you’re catching hell, not realizing all the hell you’re catching is preparing you for tomorrow… You just can’t think about this and it happens to come, just formulate it in your mind and it comes there, No, no, no. God said I’ve got to give it through revelation. I’ve got to embed this down into your spirit; to where it starts baptizing you into the Holy Ghost… You’ve got to allow God to come in and transform you to the point that people can’t even see you no more, They can only see Him.\(^\text{115}\)

Transformation, McKenzie suggests, comes from transformational experience. In this passage he explicitly notes the process of overcoming hellish circumstances and the baptism/infilling of the Holy Ghost (which he presents as inextricably connected to both one’s having been through “hell” and one’s ability to be transformed rather than defeated by such a fiery trial). In other words, for Spirit-filled believers, transformation comes through two types of experience—1) extremely difficult life challenges, and 2) transcendent spiritual encounters—and the second of these is more powerful and efficacious because of the first. The overall process, McKenzie claims, can totally remake a person to the point of unrecognizability.

\(^\text{114}\)The language of “new creature” comes from 2 Corinthians 5:17: “Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.”

\(^\text{115}\)Bishop Leroy McKenzie, FACC, June 12, 2011.
The Spirit-filled notion of transformation, then, is not simply change, but a complete overhaul of one’s “spiritual molecules.” In the process of being transformed, change may occur—one may change one’s attitude or habits, for example—but believers consider transformation to be more fundamental and permanent. The transformed believer has a new identity; she is a new self. In one preached message, Pastor Mary McKenzie questioned whether Mary, the mother of Jesus, was really a “natural” virgin. Perhaps God simply erased her past, McKenzie surmised, restoring her virginity with a holy touch so that she could bring forth the “Son of man” in purity.\textsuperscript{116} Her comment—and indeed her willingness to broach such a subject—exemplify how radical a transformation the Spirit-filled imagination is willing to accept as a possibility.

At the same time, Spirit-filled rhetoric about transformation often represents an ideal; an extreme example, or a goal toward which to strive. Transformation is a process that must be “lived out,” and in a given moment the one being transformed may be more or less aware of this process. Certainly, Spirit-filled believers claim that something miraculous—a rebirth—happens when one becomes saved, but one still has to “fight to stay saved” as Pastor McKenzie often puts it. Even if the reborn Christian is understood to be radically transformed, elements of the old self always remain. Bishop McKenzie preached in one message that, “the Bible says if any man be in Christ, then he’s a new creature. So in other words, he’s still a creature. He’s just a new one.”\textsuperscript{117}

In this world where transformation is fiercely desired but remains perpetually challenging, or even elusive, embodied forms of worship play an especially significant role. By their very nature, activities such as music-making and dance shift peoples’ experience of

\textsuperscript{116}Pastor Mary McKenzie, FACC, October 9, 2011.

\textsuperscript{117}Bishop Leroy McKenzie, FACC, March 28, 2012.
the moment. One cannot do them without physiological changes occurring. Pulse rates synchronize and neurotransmitters wash the brain with signals of catharsis and joy, and, within the culturally and religiously situated frame of the worship ritual, body and spirit become increasingly indistinguishable. The physical expressions of praise and worship allow believers to temporarily glimpse the transformation that they desire will become more permanent.

This Spirit-filled take on transformation is remarkably similar to that of several ethnographers who have reflexively discussed transformation in their own work. Ethnomusicologist Deborah Wong writes, for example, that,

> The fields of ethnomusicology, anthropology, and cultural studies (to name a few) have so thoroughly problematized ethnographic authority that one necessarily addresses the construction of cultural reality through the lens of particular subjectivities, and the fact is, my subjectivity changed in the course of my research.\(^{118}\)

Wong claims that her fieldwork experiences permanently transformed who she was. “My time in Thailand,” she claims, “fundamentally changed my own beliefs.”\(^{119}\) And, furthermore, she says, “there is no retreat from the moment subjectivity shifts, no going back…”\(^{120}\) Of course, the issue Wong writes about is nothing new for ethnographers. There is a long list of researchers who have fully or partially been initiated or acculturated into their research community, and thereby been fundamentally transformed by their fieldwork experiences. Anthropologist Barbara Tedlock’s becoming a calendar diviner among the Quiché Maya in Guatemala is one prominent example, but there are many others.\(^{121}\)


\(^{119}\) Ibid., 254

\(^{120}\) Ibid., 255
Importantly, these permanent transformations of subjectivity are intimately connected to the extraordinary experiences of field-based research. Michael Jackson writes that “ethnography confirmed for me that opening up new horizons of understanding places enormous demands not only on one’s intellectual abilities but on one’s physical, psychological, and moral resources.”\textsuperscript{122} But for ethnographers like Wong, Tedlock, Jackson, and others, it is these “enormous demands” that drive them. Jackson, in fact, embraces anthropologist Kenelm Burridge’s claim that the goal of ethnography is “metanoia”—“an ongoing series of transformations each one of which alters the predicates of being.”\textsuperscript{123} It is no stretch to claim that the apostle Paul’s directive to the Romans, which is so commonly cited at Faith Assembly—“And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind”—fits comfortably with the ethos of many ethnographers.\textsuperscript{124}

Because of a lack of information, desire, resources, and/or institutional support, life-altering cross-cultural fieldwork experiences are not in the cards for the majority of African American pentecostals. But like the ethnographers cited above, they fundamentally value renewed perspective on their own lives and their relationships with others. While the ethnographers seek “mind renewing” transformation through encounters with cultural others,


\textsuperscript{122}Jackson, *Lifeworlds*, 28.


\textsuperscript{124}Romans 12:2
Spirit-filled believers seek this transformation through encounters with a spiritual other. Whereas Michael Jackson submitted himself, through fieldwork, to “enormous demands” on his “physical, psychological, and moral resources,” Spirit-filled believers submit themselves to fasting, intensive prayer, and various kinds of sacrifice. But both ethnographers and pentecostals embrace these activities in an effort to make the border around the self more penetrable so that they might carry out transactions with the other. And these transactions, they hope, will transform them into “new creatures” with a better grasp on the complexities of existence, and, therefore, a better chance at living better (whatever that might mean in a particular cultural and religious context).

Destiny

*Bishop McKenzie:* There is something that you are supposed to be doing in life to carry you to your next dimension. Tell somebody, “I’m pregnant,”

*Congregation:* I’m pregnant,

*Bishop McKenzie:* “With my destiny.”

*Congregation:* With my destiny!126

Christian life, for the believers at Faith Assembly, is goal-directed. Preached messages, prayers, songs, and conversations are saturated with the language of achievement—“triumphs,” “victories,” “breakthroughs,” “next levels,” “new dimensions,” “higher heights and deeper depths”—each of these words or phrases representing one step

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125Faith Assembly usually begins each year with a 21-day fast during which participants consume only water, juice, and broth (for those on medication or inexperienced with fasting they allow other options). Other shorter “corporate” fasts may be “called” at various times during the year, and individuals or small groups may choose to fast on their own. In addition to believers’ daily habits of prayer and the prayers that are part of Sunday morning and Wednesday night worship services, Faith Assembly hosts a weekly early morning service (usually on Mondays) devoted exclusively to prayer. All-night prayer services are also held a few times during the year, usually at the conclusion of a fast or in response to particular church- or community-related circumstances. The sacrifices I reference here include financial sacrifices (tithes and offerings), sacrifices of time (in service to the church), and “sacrifices of praise” (a common phrase used by church members to mean generally participating physically and fervently in a worship service regardless of one’s physiological or psychological state).

126Worship service at FACC, April 3, 2011.
closer to a divinely ordained destiny. Viewing human existence as fully enmeshed in the ultimate struggle between the powers of light (God) and the powers of dark (Satan) is an idée fixe at Faith Assembly. Destiny, for these Christians, is to triumph over the trials of Satan in this life, leading eventually to eternal salvation in the next. “You’ve got to understand that destiny is right at your door,” McKenzie states, “but just because you’ve got it doesn’t mean you’re going to get it.” Continuing with a destiny-as-pregnancy metaphor he says:

The enemy has a plan to get you to abort your baby.
But, say this with me: God lives on the inside of us,
And everything we need is already in us, Congregation repeats
Because we have the power that is in Him, in us. Congregation repeats

But since spirit-filled believers do not achieve true destiny until the afterlife, they are, according to McKenzie’s metaphor, pregnant for a lifetime. There is no permanent relief in this life, only a series of tests. Thus, living as a Christian involves not only goal direction, but “heroic delay of gratification.”

This teleological view of existence manifests in various aspects of sound in Spirit-filled worship, very often in the form of an experiential climb or buildup. A sermon will begin in a reflective or meditative mode and gradually build toward climactic moments of instrumentally-punctuated chant. A song will begin sparsely with piano and solo voice, adding instruments as the verses progress and modulating to higher keys before reaching a triumphant vamp. Often, a service at Faith Assembly will be lauded by members as particularly effective if the entire praise and worship portion follows this experiential

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127 Worship service at FACC, April 3, 2011.

climb—ebbing and flowing along the way, but, overall, building in intensity right up until the beginning of the sermon. Throughout this rise in intensity the singers and MC will intermittently and repeatedly exhort the congregation with teleological rhetoric, casting their participation and praise as a goal-directed activity: “Break through, just break through!” “Press on, press! press!” “If we just push a little farther!” “Come on! Let’s go a little higher!” And so on. The message of this kind of exhortation is clear, to wholly participate is to move yourself and the congregation to the “next level,” one step closer to a spiritual goal, and one step closer to destiny.

Though teleological thinking and acting pervades African American Spirit-filled Christianity, “teleology” has long been considered a dirty word in scholarly discussions of black popular music. Musicologist Robert Fink writes, “In a discourse still dominated, like musical academia itself, by the white racial imagination, African American popular music is not supposed to have goal direction…Musical blackness is expected to be different, to be about existential freedom, about the joy of the intensely felt moment…”129 Fink outlines the development of this “racialized binarism,” showing how Charles Keil’s veneration of “grooves” and groove-based musics grew out of his reaction against Leonard Meyer’s theory that one can objectively measure “value and greatness” in musical artworks by analyzing their teleological design.130 For decades following the emergence of the Keil versus Meyer conflict in the mid-1960s, scholars were locked into the dichotomous logic of the debate: either music grooved or it was teleological. “To put it bluntly,” writes Fink:

…the large number of musical analysts who have been interested in musical teleology have not, in general, been very interested in grooves; and the smaller

129Fink, “Goal-Directed Soul?” 184-185.

130Ibid., 187-197.
number who have been very interested in grooves have not been at all interested in musical teleology.\textsuperscript{131}

For the scholars of African American music who eschewed musical teleology, however, black gospel music remained an elephant in the room. In the post-Civil Rights search to articulate an essential black aesthetic, scholars such as Pearl Williams Jones unequivocally lauded gospel as the \textit{blackest} of American musics. The first sentence in her 1975 article in \textit{Ethnomusicology}—a foundational piece in black gospel scholarship—reads: “If a basic theoretical concept of a black aesthetic can be drawn from the history of the black experience in America, the crystallization of this concept is embodied in Afro-American gospel music.”\textsuperscript{132} Yet Jones, and those who wrote in a similar vein, tended to focus on details of style rather than structural design. Fink rightly claims that gospel music is characterized by “the drive to achieve salvation, and to lead others to it…often correlated to a lifestyle—as well as a musical style—valorizing extreme goal direction and heroic delay of gratification.”\textsuperscript{133} But for Pearl Williams Jones to have embraced this idea in the 1970s would have been at odds with the accepted scholarly narrative of blackness. And at a time when African Americans (and particularly African American women) were only beginning to be accepted into the academy this would have simply been too radical. Thus, a scholarly tradition emerged in which goal-direction’s centrality in gospel music composition and performance was only implicitly acknowledged.

By exploring destiny as a fundamental property of a Spirit-filled imagination, \textit{Hearing Faith} joins voices with a growing body of scholarship that critiques the

\textsuperscript{131}Ibid., 183.


\textsuperscript{133}Fink, “Goal-Directed Soul?” 182.
longstanding binary of grooves versus goals. Like Fink, I hope to add depth to scholarly understandings of African American music by “exploring the pervasive, multiparametric tension between _telos_ and presence, between goals and grooves.”

_Power_

Ultimately the Spirit-filled imagination is about power. Believers proclaim that “there is no power but of God.” Nevertheless, based on Jesus’ words to the apostles in Acts 1:8—“ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you”—they claim that those who have been baptized by the Spirit can “tap into” this Godly power. All of the elements of the Spirit-filled imagination are aimed at guiding believers toward operating in power; toward a place where they are “more than conquerors through him that loved us.”

One of the central goals of being a Christian, Pastor Mary McKenzie declares, is to “demonstrate who God is.” Christians have a responsibility, she says, to show others the way to be “saved, healed, delivered, and set free,” but believers will never be successful in this endeavor using the “enticing words of man’s wisdom.” Only the “demonstration of the Spirit and of power” can lead others to God.

For believers at Faith Assembly, the demonstration of power may come in the form of miraculous flashes—instantaneous healings or immediately answered prayers, for example—or it may come through sustained processes of personal and spiritual growth—an alcoholic’s long road toward sobriety, or someone with a hair-trigger temper gradually learning to

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134Ibid., 187.
135Romans 13:1.
136Romans 8:37.
137Pastor Mary McKenzie, FACC, February 24, 2012.
138Ibid., McKenzie is quoting from 1 Corinthians 2:4 here.
control their anger. But whether the battles are easily won or long fought, believers seek power so that they can be victorious in “spiritual warfare.” This concept—pervasive among contemporary evangelicals and pentecostals—is at the heart of the Spirit-filled imagination. All human life, Spirit-filled believers say, is enmeshed in a battle between God and the devil that will persist until the end of the world. “We wrestle not against flesh and blood,” they often quote, “but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.” Such wrestling requires “the full armor of God” and the “power to conduct warfare” as Minister Mercedes Adams put it—drawing from Ephesians 6—in her intercessory prayer that opened the February 19, 2012 service at Faith Assembly. She prayed,

We come against every power of the enemy right now in the name of Jesus.  
And God, we just thank you, God  
That you have given us power to conduct  
Warfare.  
You said that we should stay prayed up, put on the full armor of God, that we may be able to stand against the wiles of the enemy.  
And God we stand this morning, not wimps.  
We stand as soldiers this morning,  
We stand fully armed this morning,  
And we dare the devil to come in.  
We dare him.  
In the name of Jesus.  
You have given us power  
Over every enemy, every demon, all the powers of the enemy,  
And nothing, and nothing, and nothing, and nothing shall by any means hurt us.  
And we thank you, God,  
We thank you God, we thank you God, we thank you God.  
Victory is ours.

139 Ephesians 6:12
Spirit-filled believers mediate life’s challenges through this idea that the entire thrust of humanity is but a manifestation of a much larger struggle between opposing spiritual forces. Doing so enables them “to grasp experiences that confound [them], react to events that overwhelm [them], and become creators rather than mere creatures of circumstance.” They exert this kind of power through the “weapons” of “warfare,” which, they emphasize, are “not carnal.” On February 5, 2012, Bishop McKenzie preached,

You got to remember, good and evil, God made them both…That’s why you can’t get angry with people. Just stay angry with the Devil and his spirits…Because it’s spirits. See, mama didn’t do what she done, but it’s just that spirit. Daddy didn’t do what he did, it was just that spirit. And once you know it’s a spirit…It’s just a spirit. And you got to understand that. Spirits are what you fight against. The weapons of your warfare are not carnal “but mighty through the snatching down of strongholds.” And that’s why it’s so powerful that you’ve got to be very forgiving.

Certainly, for Spirit-filled believers, the weapons of warfare include activities like worshiping, praying, and fasting, but they also include particular ways of interacting with other people—for example, being “very forgiving” as Bishop McKenzie puts it. This dimension of Spirit-filled power stands in a dialectical relationship to the militaristic rhetoric of “weapons” and “war.” Spiritual warfare often involves meekness instead of might, forgiveness instead of revenge, and silence instead of argument.

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140Michael Jackson, *Lifeworlds: Essays in Existential Anthropology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 48. The full quote, in context, reads, “The lesson I take from my experience of consulting Kuranko diviners is that one does not have to believe in the truth claims of the system for it to work in a practical and psychological sense. Crucial to this notion of work is the transformation of experience from something private and amorphous into something that is sharable and substantial. This “objectification” of subjective life may be mediated in a variety of ways—through divination, myth, storytelling, or science. But in every case, what matters existentially is that we are enabled to grasp experiences that confound us, react to events that overwhelm us, and become creators rather than mere creatures of circumstance.”

1412 Corinthians 10:4

1422 Corinthians 10:4
Whatever “weapon” may be called for by a given situation, Spirit-filled believers recognize that they have been empowered by God to be actors in the grand spiritual struggle. The power of the Holy Ghost operating within, and through, them, they say, gives them agency to do something to make life better. As Bishop McKenzie puts it in his Four Es—“empowerment” involves knowing that “there is more to life than just existing.” Being spiritually empowered, believers can make their situation better. And, in fact, they regularly testify to the success of this exertion of agency. Pastor Mary McKenzie regularly testifies that spiritual warfare—combined with modern medicine—healed her from cancer. Others speak of being delivered from situations that threatened their lives—substance abuse, violent relationships, and so on. Many speak of answered prayers. For Faith Assembly’s members, these are demonstrations of the Spirit’s power, and through such demonstrations, their faith is strengthened. Thus, the circle of the Spirit-filled imagination is completed, with the manifestations of power feeding peoples’ faith.

Conclusion

Believers at Faith Assembly exercise the Spirit-filled imagination in order to gain perspective on life, to try to maximize well-being and minimize struggle, to be able to respond better to novel, difficult, or unexpected situations in their lives. The ways of being and guides for action that form the constellation that is the Spirit-filled imagination shape people less in their religion than in their relationships with God and others. “Religious people,” Pastor Mary McKenzie preached on February 24, 2013, “don’t want people who are searching for God to come [to church]…They’re so religious they ain’t no earthly good. They don’t have enough love to help people through their situations.” McKenzie often denounces the “religious demon” or the “religious spirit” that she says does great harm to the

143From “The 4 Es” as written on Faith Assembly’s website, www.face-ministries.org.
church. People that are too religious, she claims, “are no benefit to the body of Christ” because they cannot relate to other people.\textsuperscript{144} “The church is not for the found, it’s for the lost.”\textsuperscript{145}

In a sense, the Spirit-filled imagination is what believers like those at Faith Assembly embrace instead of “religion.” It is not a strict moral code or a set of rigid doctrines. It is more like a lens that shapes their view of the world. Faced with life’s complexities and situations where no clear answer presents itself, the Spirit-filled imagination becomes a medium for negotiation.

\textsuperscript{144}Pastor Mary McKenzie, FACC, August 5, 2012.

\textsuperscript{145}Pastor Mary McKenzie, FACC, February 24, 2013. This was a favorite refrain of Bishop McKenzie’s, and one that Pastor McKenzie also repeats often.
CHAPTER 2: SOUND AND THE SONOROUS FOUNDATIONS OF FAITH

“You may not know what you’re praising God for,” declared Pastor Garry Mitchell in front of the congregation at Faith Assembly, “but you’ve got to know that you know!” Mitchell has been a stalwart of Faith Assembly since the church’s inception in the early 1990s, and in the hierarchy of church leadership he stands just behind the founders Bishop Leroy and Pastor Mary McKeznie. Mitchell is a dynamo of black artistic expressivity. He dances, sings, prays, and preaches with seemingly effortless expertise. Though he plays numerous roles in the church, he is most visible as the MC for each worship service.¹ In this capacity he combines all of his artistic gifts to energize, unify, and direct the congregation. Mitchell orchestrates experience. “I listen for the voice of God,” he told me, “and I let the anointing flow through me…and then it can flow to the congregation and stir up the Holy Spirit among them. If it works right, everyone comes together on one accord.”² Mitchell presents himself as a Spirit-led medium engaging in a process of listening, hearing, and resounding, and leading members of the congregation in their own listening, hearing, and resounding. As MC, he acts as the central figure in a collective striving to hear the Word of God in the scriptural sense proposed by Romans 10:17 (“So then faith comes by hearing, and

¹The use of the terminology “MC” has emerged concurrently with the rise of praise and worship in black churches over the last few decades. Many churches still do not use that terminology. The role played by the MC, however, has many precedents. The MC carries out the functions performed by deacons or elders in more traditional “devotional” services, and is also expected to bring the kind of enthusiasm and panache that at MC at a concert would bring. For a discussion of the crucial role of the MC in gospel concerts see Chapter 13 in Glenn Hinson, Fire in My Bones: Transcendence and the Holy Spirit in African American Gospel (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 163-188.

²Conversation with Pastor Garry Mitchell, FACC, February 20, 2011.
hearing by the word of God.”) In this striving to hear, boundaries blur—those between human voice and divine voice, between individual and collective, and between material and spiritual. And it is in this space of blurred boundaries where the distance between language and experience widens, and where Pastor Garry’s statement, “You may not know what you’re praising God for, but you’ve got to know that you know!” has resonance. The phrase might sound tautological and absurd to an outsider, but for the members of Faith Assembly who are deeply devoted to the practice of worship, it is aphoristic phenomenology; an articulation of deep pentecostal wisdom flowing directly from the Holy Spirit. When Pastor Garry challenges Faith Assembly’s members to know that they know what they “may not know,” he is talking about knowledge that is not simply rational, intellectual, or information-centered. He is speaking of something deeper and more holistic—knowing in the absence of rational proof; the kind of knowledge that is the foundation of faith.

Sound is critical to “knowing that you know” at Faith Assembly, and, thus, hearing is a key verb in this chapter. I use the word broadly as a multifaceted concept with both literal and metaphorical meanings. It encompasses physical and spiritual perceptions, as well as perceptions that resist this dichotomy. For Faith Assembly’s members, hearing also refers to the perception of Christian truth as embodied in the words and actions of Jesus Christ. “Hearing” is used repeatedly in the gospels to connote a specific kind of Christian understanding—as in “He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.”

This chapter explores the process of hearing faith. It argues that sound is not simply a medium through which worshipers at Faith Assembly communicate about their beliefs; it is a key element in a process through which worshipers actively negotiate the challenges of human existence as believers. As I noted in the Introduction, it is not uncommon for the

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propositional statements of belief proclaimed by leaders at Faith Assembly to collide or contradict. Bishop McKenzie, for example, speaks of the grave seriousness of the prayers offered during an altar call, claiming that a preacher must be “sober and diligent” and not given to “playing around.” At the same time—as I will discuss in one of the case studies in this chapter—McKenzie sometimes becomes very playful during the altar call, chiding those who are “too deep,” and insisting that it is important to “have some fun in church.” McKenzie’s declarations, it seems, sharply contradict one another. But these kinds of conceptual contradictions, this chapter shows, often create a productive tension, allowing worshipers to resolve, or negotiate, the dialectic in their own way. And sound is crucial to this process. The sounds of worship often function as a layer of communication that does not simply represent or support the tenets of belief, but instead allows for a critical and complex engagement with belief. The pentecostal epistemological ideal—not just knowing, but “knowing that you know”—requires much more than accepting particular propositions as true or false. It requires continually cultivating “ears to hear” the sounds of faith.

Why Sound?

Spirit-filled Christians do not only emphasize the centrality of hearing, but they fervently deemphasize sight. At Faith Assembly, the visual is often described as untrustworthy or deceitful. Faith Assembly’s promotional videos, website, newsletter, and even the lectern from which Bishop or Pastor McKenzie preach all bear the scripture “we walk by faith, and not by sight.” And faith, Bishop McKenzie frequently reminds his

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5 2 Corinthians 5:7
congregation “comes by hearing.” When one lives a life of faith, Spirit-filled believers proclaim, real truth exists outside the realm of sight.

This de-emphasis of the visual stands in stark contrast to Western culture’s visual obsessiveness; an obsession well documented by Don Ihde, Jacques Attali, Daniel Levin, and many others. Michael Bull and Les Back sum up this visual bias by pointing out that in the West knowledge is often represented as “a quest for ‘enlightenment’ or ‘illumination’ and understanding is identified with seeing.” Black Spirit-filled Christians turn their backs to this vision of knowledge. Their worldview and worship practices subvert this dominant visualist orientation. Eyes can deceive, they say, but ears can reveal. To know truth one must have faith. And faith comes by hearing, not by sight.

In the milieu of Spirit-filled practice, believers expect to directly experience the Holy Spirit. While they frequently characterize such transcendent experience as a perception beyond the sensual, believers do consistently claim to hear the divine. Though God’s material manifestations are experienced with all the senses, hearing is the human sense through which direct communication with God is most regularly claimed. Very few Christians testify to have directly smelled, tasted, or touched God. The nature of Spirit-

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6Romans 10:17


10There are of course some notable biblical exceptions. Most obvious for pentecostals, perhaps, is the case of Saul who saw a blinding light on the road to Damascus, a vision which figured centrally in his transformation to
filled faith, therefore, is fundamentally shaped by sound. Hearing God is one of the primary ways in which believers are assured of His existence. Bruce R. Smith—a literature scholar who employs a kind of historical acoustemology in his studies of Early Modern England—claims that “knowing the world through sound is fundamentally different than knowing the world through vision.” How Spirit-filled believers conceive of the divine and experience His power, then, represents a kind of knowledge that is “fundamentally different” from most modernized Western conceptions of knowledge. This is true both for the primary experience—knowing that one has heard God—and the secondary belief system bolstered by that experience—doctrine, theology, and so on. Bishop McKenzie often challenges worshipers at Faith Assembly to get “tuned in” to the Word of God. To be a true believer, he emphasized, one must have a “sound” relationship with God.

The centrality of sound to pentecostal knowledge has its roots in some of the earliest Hebrew scriptures. The sound of God’s word is the creative force in the Bible’s creation narrative. God spoke the world into existence. The Genesis account gives no indication that He visualized or constructed it, but only that the sound of His voice brought it about. And according to Genesis, even after God molded a human figure, man remained lifeless until God breathed into him. Philosopher Don Ihde opens his path-breaking phenomenological account of Listening and Voice with “The beginning of man is in the midst of word. And the center of word is in breath and sound…” The sound of God’s primordial breath is amplified

Paul, author of the New Testament epistles. See Acts 9. Many pentecostals also testify to visions and speak of “sight” and “vision” as particularly important dimensions of divine revelation. My emphasis on sound in this chapter is not in any way intended to refute the spiritual and religious significance of sight or other sensory realms.


12Don Ihde, Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound, 3.
in the New Testament when “a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind” brings the first-century Christians in direct contact with the power of the Holy Spirit.\textsuperscript{13}

Sound is the medium through which such ineffable experience can be translated into human terms, because sound, according to Bruce Smith, “is at once the most forceful stimulus that human beings experience, and the most evanescent.”\textsuperscript{14} Sound can be very much \textit{like} Spirit. Along these lines, black Spirit-filled Christians often fervently emphasize the importance of speaking one’s prayers out loud. Although God knows one’s thoughts, they say, one’s prayers are much more likely to “manifest in the natural realm” when one speaks them into existence, breathing into them the breath (and sound waves) of life; a process that mirrors God’s original granting of life to man.\textsuperscript{15} The exhortation repeated in the Psalms to praise God with a “loud noise,” is also relevant here, suggesting that believers use volume to mirror, in some limited way, the immense power of the object of their praise.\textsuperscript{16} Faith Assembly uses technology to carry out this directive, cranking their sound system to extreme decibels during worship services. Pastor Mary McKenzie’s regularly declares that “church should be the \textit{loudest} place on earth.” Sitting around the band pit one Sunday after service I was talking to Pastor Wade—Faith Assembly’s minister of music at the time—about the volume level in the church. He remarked, “The bible says ‘make a joyful noise,’ and as far as I know there’s no such thing as a quiet noise.”\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{13} Acts 2:2

\textsuperscript{14} Bruce Smith, “Tuning into London c. 1600,” 128.

\textsuperscript{15} Bishop McKenzie frequently encouraged believers to pray aloud: to “release your prayers into the atmosphere;” to “call those things to be \textit{not} as though they were;” and to “boldly speak stuff into existence.”

\textsuperscript{16} See Psalm 33:3 and Psalm 98:4.

\textsuperscript{17} Conversation with Pastor Wade Sams, FACC, April 21, 2013.
Pastor Mary McKenzie suggests that sound can actually be the primary agent of the Holy Spirit’s transformative power. In one service she walked into the band pit and stood in the middle of the musicians as we were playing. She said,

Hallelujah. I decree a sound that shall come from this corner like no other sound the world has ever heard. It will have such an anointing that it will set the captives free. It will heal people. It will take them to new dimensions in God.\textsuperscript{18}

Here McKenzie speaks of music not as music in the sense of melodies, harmonies, rhythms, and so on, but as sound; as a force that transmits the anointing which can actively do work—set minds free, heal bodies, and move spirits to “new dimensions in God.”

In a 1970 article, Don Ihde explores ways in which sound is like God. He outlines three “parallel features” in the “experience of sound” and the “idea of God.” Sound, like the idea of God forwarded in the Hebrew Scriptures, is 1) invisible, 2) spatially surrounding, and 3) temporal.\textsuperscript{19} The first two, I believe, are self-evident, though the third requires some explanation. If God is omnipresent and eternal, how could He be temporal? Ihde writes,

The Old Testament God is recognizable by temporal repetition; He is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, because he maintained his promise through time. No visual idol need be passed down from generation to generation, but the story, the telling, must be carried down through time. The God of the Old Testament is not timeless, but persistent through time.\textsuperscript{20}

This conception of God certainly resonates with black Spirit-filled believers who often reel off a list of biblical “testimonies” as evidence that God will “do the same for them.”\textsuperscript{21} Such assertions are sometimes accompanied with the phrase, “He may not show up when you want

\textsuperscript{18}Pastor Mary McKenzie, FACC, April 28, 2013.


\textsuperscript{20}Ihde, “God and Sound,” 251.

\textsuperscript{21}Listen, for example, to the vamp from Smokie Norful’s contemporary gospel hit “Justified,” where Norful references the “testimonies” of the city of Nineveh (book of Jonah), Daniel, King David, and Barack Obama as evidence that God “did it for them” so He “will do the same for you.” “Justified,” \textit{Live}, EMI Gospel, 2009.
him to, but He’s always right on time!” Spirit-filled believers, then, understand God’s revelations and His transformative power to come in spurts, at particular times. And most would agree that their personal experience squares with Ihde’s characterization of the Hebrew Scriptures in general, that “the predominant form in which God appears is in terms of sound, in words.” Ihde goes on to claim that “This is what contrasts biblical mysticism, for example, from other forms of mysticism. Here the peak of a religious experience is the reception of a word from God rather than of an identity between mystic and the divine.”

Ihde’s phrasing here even matches that of Spirit-filled Christians who emphasize the importance of listening for “a Word from God.” Ihde could have added a fourth characteristic: sound’s ability to cross boundaries, or, to put it another way, the difficulty with which sound is constrained. This is one of sound’s most commonly noted properties, as in the truism that one can close one’s eyelids to avoid an unpleasant or overwhelming sight, but sound cannot be so easily escaped. One cannot escape from God either, black Spirit-filled believers say. In many of his preached messages, Bishop McKenzie paraphrases New Testament scriptures declaring, “Every knee has got to bow, and every tongue has got to confess that Jesus is Lord!”

Humans will be forced to face God’s presence, McKenzie implies. It is a presence that cannot be constrained by borders and boundaries. Again, this is an instance in which sound is like God, and, in fact, is one of the reasons for the embrace of extreme levels of volume in many Spirit-filled churches. When the sound waves of worship reach outside of the church walls, believers see it as a form of evangelism. One Sunday when visitors were being recognized at Faith Assembly, a woman stood. The Master of Ceremonies asked her to tell her “church home” and “who invited her.” She said that she did

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23 See Romans 14:11, and Philippians 2:10-11.
not have a church home and that no one had invited her. She had been shopping at the Food Lion next door to the church and heard the sound of people “just praising the Lord,” and decided that she “had to be part of it.”24 “So it was the Holy Ghost that brought you in?” the MC asked rhetorically, and the congregation erupted into cheers and applause. It is an old story—the Siren-like pull of Spirit-filled sound waves that spill out beyond physical and cultural boundaries.25 Sound, like God, reaches all those in the vicinity.

For Spirit-filled Christians, sound is a representation and manifestation of, as well as a medium for, the kinds of spiritual experience and knowledge that they seek and value. As such, I focus on sound in an attempt to better understand the depth of meaning that emerges in Spirit-filled worship. In addition to this, however, the focus on sound is an act of historical reclamation. Racist commentators searching for “evidence” of the inherent inferiority of people of African descent have long turned to sound.26 Even among black Christians there is a long history of internal conflict—often fierce—revolving around worship music and expressive utterances. Particular sonic profiles were closely connected to class and, thus, middle class churches often carefully policed the boundaries of acceptable sound.27

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24FACC, August 15, 2010.

25For instance, George Gershwin biographer Howard Pollack recounts how Gershwin based the sound of overlapping prayers in the storm scene from *Porgy and Bess* on the sounds he heard spilling out of a “black Holy Rollers church” in Hendersonville, North Carolina. See Pollack, *Gershwin: His Life and Work* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 579. A similar trope appears in Miles Davis’ autobiography where he talks about being deeply inspired by the sound of an old black woman’s voice that he heard drifting out of an Arkansas forest when he was young. See Davis, *Miles: The Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 28.


Although current writers may not be so uncouth in their characterizations, a lack of engagement with some of the more extreme forms of Pentecostal sound—shout music, for example—reflects a continuing uneasiness around particular sonic expressions. By making sound a central analytical focus, my project works against centuries of (at worst) racist and (at best) shallow critiques of black Spirit-filled worship. This chapter discusses the depth, range, and complexity of sound in Spirit-filled worship in general, and unpacks the layers of meaning and significance embedded in sound during particular moments of worship at Faith Assembly.

Guided by ideas from some of the leading figures in the field of pentecostal studies—including James K.A. Smith and David D. Daniels—the next section of this chapter will articulate Faith Assembly’s pentecostal epistemology more precisely and explain how sound is central to this epistemology. The chapter will then present three case studies that explore this unique relationship between sound and knowledge as it emerges in the practice of worship.

**Epistemology and Acoustemology at Faith Assembly**

Why do believers at Faith Assembly go to church? Certainly there are many reasons and different motivating factors for different people at different times. But in conversation with me, many members have employed metaphors about eating and being fed. Gifted singer and longtime Faith Assembly member Stephanie Lesane said that people come because they are “hungry for God.” Her phrase cuts right to the core of the matter—for some, coming to church is as elemental as eating. Those who do not eat will die. And hunger cannot be satisfied intellectually. One cannot *think* one’s way to satiation—there must be a physical encounter with food. Likewise, members come to Faith Assembly seeking a physical

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28 Conversation with Stephanie Lesane, FACC, June 26, 2011.
encounter with God. Sister Stephanie’s phrase implies that the desire for God cannot be satisfied merely by thought; one must experience God. But if the aliment is immaterial—spiritual rather than physical—how is one assured of its nourishment? One cannot simply know—intellectually—but one must holistically “know that she knows.”

In his book *Thinking in Tongues*, James K.A. Smith considers the “inchoate ‘understanding of understanding’ at work in the pentecostal claim that ‘I know that I know that I know.’” He suggests that “at work here is a... performative critique of modern criteria for knowledge—a pentecostal critique of the rationalism (or cognitivism or ‘intellectualism’) that characterizes modern accounts of knowledge.” 29 Smith further qualifies that this is “not a critique or rejection of reason as such but rather a commentary on a particularly reductionistic model of reason and rationality, a limited, stunted version of what counts as ‘knowledge’.” 30 The truths embedded in what he calls the “narrative knowledge” of pentecostal testimony, or the “affective knowledge” of embodied pentecostal worship, are not just intellectually known, but proven by experience. Speaking specifically about testimony, Smith writes, “The truth is the story... If the testimony is translated into ‘mere’ facts, codified into propositions, distilled into ideas, then we are dealing with a different animal: I would both ‘know’ something different and ‘know’ it differently.” 31

Smith’s argument is crucial to my own. Faith Assembly’s believers come to church “hungry for God,” seeking spiritual nourishment. Such a holistic desire cannot be fulfilled simply by obtaining knowledge that conforms to a “reductionistic model of reason and

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30 Ibid. 53.

31 Ibid. 64.
rationality.” There are truths embedded in the practices and experiences of worship at Faith Assembly that are irreducible to ideas. And these truths are the nutritional substance of the spiritual food believers seek. Bishop McKenzie says it like this:

The teaching of the Word has got to be in your spirit. Once that gets in your spirit, nothing... [rhetorical silence]
See, you can’t have head religion. You’ve got to have Spirit-filled religion! Cause your head will play games with you. But, guess what, the Spirit can’t lie to you. The Bible don’t say nothing about ‘know the head by the head,’ It says know the Spirit by the spirit!”

Getting to know the Spirit by the spirit, McKenzie often explains in sermons, is a challenging life-long process, but also a life-changing process. It requires coming to church and “eating the word,” he says; not just reading the text of the Bible, or receiving a “message,” or going through the motions of liturgical ritual, but engaging in a multifaceted process that includes fellowship, song, sermon, altar calls, prayer, fasting, service, and other acts of worship.

“Eating the word” through worship allows one to obtain, increase, and refine Spirit-filled knowledge in such a way that transforms the totality of one’s personhood.

Similarly, Smith writes, “A life of discipleship—a life of obedience and joy, a life of repentance and transformation—is not the fruit of merely intellectual assent or conviction... Changes in a way of life will not take place until the affective core is reached.” At Faith Assembly sound is a vital medium for the transmission of the kind of knowledge that reaches believers’ “affective cores.” The production and reception of sound at Faith Assembly are not merely “byproducts” of worship, but active processes through which believers “eat the word” and thereby seek to transform their lives.

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32 Bishop Leroy McKenzie, FACC, February 5, 2012.
33 Smith, *Thinking in Tongues*, 77 (italics in original).
Theologian and ordained Pentecostal minister David D. Daniels makes the connection between sound and pentecostal knowledge explicit. He offers an historical account of Pentecostal sound in which he theorizes sound as “a hermeneutic” that generates knowledge in a way that “supplements epistemology with acoustemology.” He explains, “Sound functions as a way of knowing, hearing, experiencing, and being in the world.” As Daniels relates, for early Pentecostals, sound was a powerful way of transmitting knowledge about divine presence and activity. He quotes historian of American evangelicalism Lee Eric Schmidt who claims that Pentecostals “cultivated an especially fine-tuned ear for the voices, sounds and noises of the divine world.” Participants in the early-20th century Los Angeles-based Azusa Street revival, Daniels notes, claimed to sing “heavenly anthems” simultaneously with bands of angels who were “singing the same heavenly song in harmony.” This idea of joining voices with heavenly beings remains present in contemporary pentecostal worship. I attended a service in Houston, Texas in 2010 where the worship leader, Daniel Johnson, began speaking in the middle of a song, declaring that there were angels surrounding God whose only job was to sing “holy, holy, holy.” He invited to

34 Daniels belongs to the Church of God in Christ, the largest African American Pentecostal denomination. Given that Daniels uses the term “Pentecostal” in a specific denominational context, I will use the capital-P spelling when discussing his article.


36 Ibid. 26.


38 This quote comes from the newsletter of the Azusa Street Revival, Apostolic Faith (Los Angeles) vol. 1, no. 1, September 1906, 1:4.
congregation to join voices with those angels, proceeding to lead an extended call and
response chant of “holy, holy, holy.”\textsuperscript{39}

Whether it is Los Angeles in 1906 or Houston in 2010, Spirit-filled believers hear a
special kind of sound when they collectively embrace the possibility of divine harmony. As
the faithful imagine the music of heavenly beings—and they listen, hear, and re-sound—they
create a new sound that “functions as a way of knowing, hearing, experiencing, and being in
the world.” What is transmitted by this sound cannot be distilled into ideas that stand up to
rationalistic tests of truth. Instead, it is something that believers claim proves its truth by
penetrating the “affective core.” Hearing such sound is not merely a passing ecstatic
experience, but an experiential building block on the long road of Christian discipleship. It is
part of the process of “eating the word,” getting its teaching “in your spirit,” and building
faith which “comes by hearing.” Living a committed Christian life, Bishop McKenzie often
states, is only possible through a process of getting “tuned into God.”\textsuperscript{40} Pentecostal sound is a
medium for and a manifestation of this process.

**The Sound**

If members come to Faith Assembly because they have a hunger—a holistic and full-
bodied desire that can only be satisfied through holistic and full-bodied nourishment; and if
this nourishment comes, in some crucial way, through sound, then it is important to
investigate the specifics of that sound. This chapter explores what might be thought of as
aesthetic environments. These include music and musical utterances, but are not limited to
those.

\textsuperscript{39} June 27, 2010, St. John’s Downton, Houston, TX.

\textsuperscript{40} A few examples: “We need to get in tune with God” (October 9, 2011); and “I’ve made up my mind to stay
tuned to my godly destiny” (April 4, 2011).
The sounds that are significant to worship at Faith Assembly can be very generally classed into three categories: 1) vocal utterance, 2) instrumental utterance, and 3) music. The first includes non-linguistic sounds such as cries, screams, and Spirit-filled laughs that often erupt in experientially charged moments of worship. Related to these utterances are short phrases—“Hallelujah!,” “Thank you, Jesus!,” “Amen!,” and so forth—that churchgoers take as crucial indicators of congregational engagement in a given worship service. The sound of tongues-speech, or glossolalia, also serves as an index of experiential intensity. And of course there are the more syntactic forms of speech that make up worship: the words of prayers, scripture readings, the preached message, and so on. Importantly, even these modes of communication are usually richly stylized and inflected—their meanings at times reliant on sonic presentation as much as linguistic content.\(^{41}\)

Instrumental utterances include sounds such as hand clapping and foot stomping as well as those that are aided by technology such as the sounds of the organ, drum kit, or guitar. Most often these exist as part of a larger musical utterance, but they can also be used as brief sonic punctuations akin to a verbal “Hallelujah!,” or “Amen!” An impassioned moment of prayer or meaning-rich turn of phrase in a preached message will almost always elicit handclaps from members of the congregation. Similarly, licks played on an instrument (possibly the guitar, bass, drums, organ, saxophone, or some combination of these) will punctuate and dialogue with experientially heightened moments of preaching or prayer.

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Music is a catch-all category for vocal, instrumental, or combinations of these utterances that move toward patterned presentations. In his 2005 book on improvisation ethnomusicologist David Borgo bemoans the fact that “we have but a single English word, music, to describe such a vast array of ways in which to engage with this most human pursuit.”[^42] I am confronted with this linguistic poverty in discussing the sonic environment during worship at Faith Assembly. As ministers or pastors pray, preach, or exhort in front of the congregation they often slip seamlessly in and out of song. Bits of sung or hummed melody emerge from various members of the congregation in response to their being stirred by other utterances. Improvised instrumental music comes in and out throughout a worship service, following experiential contours. Improvised “worship music” accompanies intense moments of collective devotion or solemnity, while “shout music” accompanies similarly intense moments of a more ecstatic nature. Part of each worship service is of course explicitly devoted to song, but even these moments are often preceded and followed by instrumentally accompanied exhortations that many outsiders might classify as closer to “noise” on a noise-to-music continuum.[^43]

I present these three categories as a heuristic utility. To actually classify every sound at Faith Assembly according to these categories would be as difficult as it would be unrevealing. The various sounds heard during worship are fluid and constantly interacting. Each vocal utterance, for example, occurs in context, its semiotic value dependent on a range of preceding, simultaneous, and yet to come sounds. In the case studies that follow, the lines


between these categories will blur, hopefully allowing the heterogeneity of the soundscapes of worship to emerge.

The first case study examines one moment in a worship service where a recording broadcast over the sound system fades out and is then revived by the church’s live musicians. I discuss the ways in which this sonic transformation models, mirrors, and interacts with other ideas about transformation central to members’ religious beliefs and experiences. The second case study analyzes the sounds that occurred during the altar call of one service. A kind of impromptu “mashup” occurred as Bishop Leroy McKenzie began singing a secular r&b hit from the 1990s as the band played the changes to a contemporary gospel song. I unpack the many layers of signification that were (or potentially were) in play in this particular sonic environment. The third case study recounts an improvised musical journey that constituted about 30 minutes of one service. It began with a contemporary gospel recording and ended with the murmuring sounds of the entire church speaking in tongues and praying aloud without instrumental accompaniment. I show how, in a church less than 20 years old whose leaders often rhetorically denigrate the past, sound can become a medium for enacting cultural and religious history and transmitting a particular kind of historical knowledge.

CASE STUDY 1: Sound, Transferal, Transformation, and Transcendence

Sunday morning, September 27, 2009: The Spirit is not moving this Sunday. The atmosphere is sluggish. The musicians and singers seem stiff and a little out of sync as they bring forth the first two selections. The congregation responds politely with handclaps and words of encouragement, but the all-important goals of coming together on “one accord” and setting an atmosphere for Spirit-filled worship are not being realized. Even Pastor Garry
Mitchell, whose extraordinary skills as an MC can often stir even the coldest congregation, makes little headway as he exhorts those gathered to “Get up and give God some real praise! If He’s done anything for you, you ought to give Him a radical praise! Get up out of your seat! Open your mouth and praise your God!”

Members dutifully stand and clap their hands. A few of the women on the front row shout “Hallelujah!” and “Praise Jesus!” But a feeling of real togetherness remains elusive. Even in the band pit, as we punctuate Pastor Garry’s exhortations, we can’t seem to lock together. My guitar attacks are coming too early, and the drummer’s too late. I survey the congregation. Face after face looks starkly aware that something is not clicking.

Rather than continue his attempts to rouse the congregation through exhortation, Pastor Garry moves on with the service, welcoming up his teenage daughter to “bless us in dance.” She comes and stands motionless and silent in front of the altar. After the soundman does a bit of fumbling with an MP3 player in the sound booth behind the congregation, loud recorded music begins to play. Pastor Garry’s daughter performs agile self-choreographed movements that are gestural amplifications of the lyrics of the song. As the recording reaches its climatic coda, she lip-syncs as she dances:

No more heartaches!
No more pain!
No more disappointment!
It will all be over!
It will all be over!
It will all be over! 44

Pastor Garry’s daughter runs back and forth in front of the altar, throwing her arms wildly as if casting off a heavy weight. Popping up one by one, members of the congregation

44 The title of this song is “I Can Only Imagine.” It was written by Bart Millard and made famous by his all-white Christian rock band MercyMe, originally appearing on their 2001 album Almost There (Word Distribution). The recording which was being used at Faith Assembly was a cover version by LaTonja Blair, which, to my knowledge, has not been commercially released.
stand. Many of them lift their hands high into the air. Some sway with the music, but one or two stand absolutely motionless. Sobs, tongues speech, and cries of “hallelujah!” come in short bursts from across the congregation. I glance at Pastor Mary McKenzie who is on the front row. The muscles in her face strain, her eyes are clenched tight and turned toward the ceiling. Her hands reach at the sky and her lips fire rapid streams of glossolalia, the sound of which is drowned out by the loud recorded music. There is no more sluggishness in the congregation. An experiential transformation has occurred—what Pastor Garry calls a “shift in the atmosphere.” For Spirit-filled Christians, this transformation is engulfing, and it is both communal and deeply personal. The dance and the recording kindled the transformation, but the appreciation, participation, and coalescence of the congregation was essential to fuel the flames. Now believers are feeling the “consuming fire” of the Holy Spirit’s presence. They are entering into the place where those who are “hungry for God” can be fed, where they can hear with spiritual ears the sonorous foundations of faith. But the recording is fading out and Pastor Garry’s daughter’s dance is over.

We—the musicians—begin playing along to the recording’s fading vamp. With microphone in hand, Pastor Garry returns to the front of the church singing the closing lines of the song. He encourages the congregation to sing along and as they take over the song he starts to speak over their musical foundation. We repeat the song’s vamp over and over for several minutes. Pastor Garry continues to mix speech, prayer, and song, ministering to the congregation and directing the flow of experience. Believers sing, pray out loud, and speak in tongues. Some walk around the sanctuary. Two women prostrate themselves at the altar. Many hands remain lifted and many tears fall.
For believers at Faith Assembly this “shift in the atmosphere” is experiential confirmation that the Holy Spirit is at work. The shift confirms believers’ knowledge of the Holy Spirit’s transformative power. More broadly, the experience of moments when there is a “shift in the atmosphere” helps to build faith in the idea of a divine plan, as they view these moments as evidence of God’s continuing transformation of the world, leading eventually to the establishment of His kingdom. During day-to-day life in “the world” they look around and see an imperfect and broken existence—injustice, poverty, pain, hopelessness. But transformative moments of worship undergird believers’ knowledge that it might be otherwise. When talking about this kind of experience, worshipers at Faith Assembly use metaphors such as “going to the next level,” “pressing in His presence,” and “breaking through.” These phrases suggest a concerted effort to glimpse this other realm.

Throughout this segment of the worship service, sonic and experiential transformations and deeply intertwined. I want to explore this intertwined relationship by focusing on the concepts of space and knowledge.

Space. As I outlined in Chapter 1, the praise and worship segment of a service at Faith Assembly usually follows a set structure. It begins with two or three songs sung by the praise team and accompanied by the musicians. The MC will then interact with the congregation, offering rousing words and/or prayers. A solo or group dance accompanied by recorded music usually follows. Then the MC will return to acknowledge all birthdays and anniversaries for that week and to welcome any visitors. The praise team then returns to sing. Praise and worship concludes when the Word begins. (See Table 2.1)

45These phrases are common parlance for a wide swath of African American pentecostals and regularly make appearances in gospel songs. See, for example, “Going to Another Level,” Israel and New Breed, Live from Another Level, Epic/Integrity, 2004; “Press in Your Presence,” Shana Wilson, The Nations are Waiting, self-released, 2008; and “A Move of God is On the Way,” Norman Hutchins, Where I Long to Be, JDI Records, 2006, which starts with the lyric, “I feel a breakthrough coming your way.”
Table 2.1: Order of Events at Faith Assembly

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Segment</th>
<th>Leader / Activity</th>
<th>Approximate Length</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Praise and Worship</td>
<td>Praise Team, 2 or 3 songs</td>
<td>15 - 25 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Master of Ceremonies (MC), exhortation and welcome</td>
<td>5 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Choreographed Dance</td>
<td>5 - 10 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MC, exhortation and recognition of birthdays, anniversaries, and visitors</td>
<td>10 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Praise Team, 1 or 2 songs</td>
<td>10 – 15 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Word (Sermon)</td>
<td>Bishop or Pastor McKenzie</td>
<td>60 – 90 minutes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On September 27, 2009 after Pastor Garry’s daughter’s dance ended the recognition of birthdays and welcoming of visitors should have followed. But a new space was opened in the structure of the service. The shift in the atmosphere that overtook the church at the climax of dance was extended as the musicians continued the music. While this was, in one sense, an interruption in the expected flow of events, in another sense, the musicians picking up the song prevented an interruption in the worship experiences of congregants. Praise Team leader Minister Francis Freeman says that the Holy Spirit extends moments of worship like this in order to do the work He needs to do. “It might be healing, it might be deliverance, lifting burdens...He knows what the people need.”

On this particular Sunday—and similar situations are not uncommon—recorded music (accompanied by dance) was what effectively stirred the atmosphere, but live music was needed to sustain the transformation. These played complimentary roles—one likely would have not functioned as effectively without the other. While commercial recordings are a ubiquitous presence at Faith Assembly, and while the Spirit often moves powerfully when a recording is being broadcast over their PA system, rarely is a recording long enough to sustain a level of worship in which spiritual work can occur. Thus, semi-improvised codas

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46Conversation with Minister Francis Freeman, FACC, September 19, 2010.
performed by the church’s live musicians are essential to opening up temporal space so that those who are “hungry for God” might be fed.

*Knowledge*. When a transition from recorded music to live music occurs during worship at Faith Assembly it does more than just open up space. It communicates particular kinds of pentecostal knowledge. A transition from recorded to live music, heard in the context of Spirit-filled worship, give a kind of holistic resonance—a tangibility, perhaps—to concepts that are difficult to grasp with the intellect alone. Sound gives ideas about rebirth and incarnation, for example, a more direct path to the “affective core,” allowing them to be grasped pre- and post-intellectually.47

First, a shift from recorded to live sound acts a kind of “rebirth motive.” As with Christianity in general, resurrection is a dominant theme at Faith Assembly. Members openly and readily refer to themselves as “born-again Christians,” and testimonies of spiritual blessings—such as healing and deliverance—are often told as death-and-rebirth narratives, and usually related to Christ’s resurrection. For a song—in recorded form—to fade out and then be immediately revived—in live form—mimes this idea of rebirth in a very palpable way. It is an aural reminder of belief in the possibility of renewal for one’s own life and the wider world. And coming on the heels of the experiential transformation that had overtaken the church on September 27, 2009, it acts as a deeper confirmation that the Holy Spirit is at work breathing new life into things that were dead or dying.

Second, the live takeover of a song that began as a recording symbolizes the Holy Spirit’s “takeover” of worldly experience. A recording necessarily has limits—it has a clear beginning and ending and lasts for a set amount of time. But when it is taken up by live musicians these limits are thwarted. The musical takeover echoes the experiential

47Smith, *Thinking in Tongues*, 77.
transformation that believers understand as a spiritual takeover. This bolsters worshipers’ belief that the power of the Holy Spirit—whose presence is now felt in this heightened experiential state—can bring about transcendence of the apparent limitations of worldly existence.

Third, there is an incarnational resonance in the shift from recorded to live music. What was disembodied—recorded music coming through speakers with no human performers visible—becomes embodied—replaced in the hands of the church musicians, who are not only visible human beings, but also members of the church with whom most in the congregation are personally acquainted. Through this transition the Holy Spirit’s presence is enfleshed in a localized symbol of the incarnation as related in the gospel of John, “and the word was made flesh.”

As the song is locally embodied, it becomes a medium for the sound of “one accord”—that transcendent unity that is essential for welcoming and sustaining the Holy Spirit’s presence. This sound of unity proliferates as many individuals begin sharing their gifts simultaneously. When the dance began, the congregation initially played more of an appreciative role than an active role. Pastor Garry’s daughter was the primary focus and her gift of dance (coupled with the music of the recording) was the primary medium of worship. But when the musicians pick up the recording, a way for the active confluence of many different localized gifts is opened. The gifts of the dancer meet with those of the musicians as they “catch” and continue the song. Over this fluid and malleable musical foundation, Pastor Garry begins to share his copious verbal and melodic gifts, and congregants’ own gifts of glossolalia, discernment, prayer, and worship all begin playing an active role in the gestalt of the moment. If the shift from recorded to live music opens up

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48 John 1:14.
space for the Holy Spirit’s presence to thrive, it also represents a way in which this presence is actively embodied by the congregation.

When I spoke with my friends at Faith Assembly about moments in worship services when sound shifts from recorded to live they did not use terms like “rebirth motive” or “incarnational resonance,” though several found these interpretations interesting. My fellow musicians and members of the Praise Team almost all emphasized the idea of “flow”—“flowing in the Spirit,” “letting the anointing flow,” and even the more practical “it keeps the service flowing.” The idea of flow is in fact pervasive at Faith Assembly, and this emphasis on flow, I believe, reinforces the significance of sound. If the experience of the Spirit is an experience of flow, sound is the best way to sensually represent that. Sound is constantly moving, it is engulfing and not easily restricted by boundaries. Spirit-filled believers often say that the Spirit flows from “heart to heart and breast to breast.” In a similar fashion, music can flow from a recording to a group of live musicians. Faith Assembly’s believers value a kind of fluidity in worship that is outwardly manifest in sound.

There are many other ways I could analyze this moment. A more traditional musicological analysis, for example, might have focused more on the musical and lyrical content of the song that was passed from recording to live music. And in fact, there is a fascinating story embedded there. The song was originally recorded by an all-white band (MercyMe) and marketed mostly to a white audience. An African American gospel singer (LaTonja Blair) encountered the song and recorded her own significantly altered version. She then placed this recording on her MySpace page, where it was found by the dancer who danced to the song at Faith Assembly. This moment of the September 27, 2009 worship service, then, would be fertile ground for an analysis of issues of the performance and
negotiation of racial identity and the ways in which racial identity are intertwined with spiritual experience for many American Christians. These issues are certainly important, but here I chose to focus on the “pure sonics” of the moment in an attempt to capture meanings that are often ignored or relegated to secondary status in more traditional forms of musicological analysis. I also hope that my analysis highlighted some of the meanings that emerged in the immediate experience of the moment, instead of only focusing on those that are more removed. That being said, in the next case study I want to bring these two types of analysis together and focus not only on the purely sonic significance of the moment, but also on how its sounds exist in broader contexts richly interwoven with cultural and religious meaning.

**CASE STUDY 2: Sound and the Heterogeneity of Meaning**

The altar call, which follows the preached Word at Faith Assembly, frequently becomes a sonically heterogeneous affair. As people begin coming to the altar—either on their own accord or called up by the preacher—the band begins playing softly. As this music asserts a presence Bishop McKenzie will often act as a kind of sanctified soul crooner singing his way through the altar call, repeating variations on a refrain as he moves from prayer recipient to prayer recipient. This refrain may be improvised, or it may be based on the lyrics of the song that the musicians are playing. Usually, members of the Praise Team will turn on their microphones and join in, acting as McKenzie’s backup singers, but doing so from where they stand or sit in the congregation. At various times one of the Praise Team members may take over the lead, singing flourishes above the others’ repeated refrain while McKenzie speaks a prayer or expels bursts of glossolalia. Members of the congregation will sing along as well, becoming more or less audible according to the swells and ebbs in the
volume of the amplified instruments and voices. Prayer recipients play their own part in the sonic texture, frequently crying out “hallelujah!” or “thank you Jesus!” or some mix of screams, shouts, “holy laughter,” glossolalia or other sounds. The instrumentalists are expected to respond to and/or influence all of these fluctuations in sound and experience. As Bishop McKenzie moves about the sanctuary praying for different congregants, Pastor Garry Mitchell follows closely behind and “conducts” the musicians according to the way he “feels” the moment. For instance, he often plays “air guitar” to request more volume and activity from the lead guitar, or mimes a particular drum pattern to suggest a change in rhythmic feel. Mitchell may even walk by the band pit and sing a melodic motive for the musicians to “catch,” communicating that he has “heard in the Spirit” a motive that is particularly appropriate for the current flow of experience.

Such heterogeneity of sound makes the altar call the most sonically interactive segment of a worship service. The pastor, MC, prayer recipient, congregation, musicians, and Praise Team are all involved and all have a range of improvisational flexibility. But this most aesthetically collaborative part of the service is simultaneously the most individualized part of the service as Bishop McKenzie prays for specific people—often people he knows very well, and often with direct reference to specific situations in their lives. Thus the dialectic between individual and collective is at the forefront of how believers perceive meaning in the rituals of the altar call. Individuals come forward during the altar call because they desire change—to be “saved,” to be healed, to be delivered from a particular vice, and so on. As Bishop McKenzie lays on hands and prays for individuals, the congregation perceives that the desired change has been brought about through the outward manifestations of that individual’s experience—she may, for example, fall to the floor “slain in the Spirit,” or begin
shaking and shivering, or burst into sobs. The collective follows the contours of this experience. Congregants may cry out in response to a prayer-recipient’s cry, a musician may imitate the rhythms of the recipient’s glossolalia, or the Praise Team singers may swell in volume at the climactic moment just before the recipient falls to the floor. The collective uses sound to confirm and strengthen the experiential knowledge of the individual and to mirror and amplify the flow of spiritual presence that believers understand as vital to the desired transformation.

But while the sounds of the altar call are, for believers, deeply spiritual, they also communicate a range and complexity of meanings. These meanings emerge from that powerfully charged meeting place between the material and the spiritual—human limitation and divine perfection—that characterizes many of the most significant moments of pentecostal worship. Focusing on one particular example, we can explore how the sonic aesthetic of the altar call allows seemingly contradictory connotations—sacred and secular, traditional and contemporary, deadly serious and downright silly, worship and entertainment—to meld and mingle. The knowledge embodied in the sounds of the altar call is complex and multilayered. And this complexity of meaning, as I’ll show at the end of this discussion, has important implications for broader scholarly discussions about black religious music.

*August 28, 2011.* The Sunday morning service at Faith Assembly began at 10am as usual, proceeding with songs from the Praise Team, a choreographed dance to a popular recording, an extended moment of quiet worship and prayer led by Pastor Garry Mitchell, recognition of birthdays, anniversaries, and visitors, and a few more songs from the Praise Team. Bishop McKenzie began the Word around 11 a.m., declaring that he had titled his
message “What Do You See? And How Do You See Yourself?” McKenzie drew from the 13th chapter of the book of Numbers in which God instructs Moses to send a group of men into the land of Canaan to “see whether it be good or bad.” Some of the men reported back that this was God’s Promised Land that “floweth with milk and honey,” while others reported that it was a land that “eateth up its inhabitants.” “There we saw giants,” these men reported, “and we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight.”

McKenzie used this scripture to expound upon one of his perennial themes—the limitations, and even deceitfulness, of sight. He encouraged the congregation to act “according to faith” and not “according to what you see.” “Call those things to be not as though they were,” he said, paraphrasing Romans 4:17. “I know what it looks like, but that ain’t what I’m going to believe.”

After he had been preaching for about an hour McKenzie markedly decreased his intensity and spoke calmly, suggesting a transition into the altar call. Using a synthesized strings sound, the keyboardist began to play very softly behind him. As McKenzie concluded his message the musicians transitioned into the chord changes for “Give Myself Away,” a popular recording at the time—a slow worship ballad—and one that we frequently played during altar calls. The song’s basic progression is a very common 8-bar descending bass figure: I / I / V6 / V6 / vi / V / IV / IV.

After we played once through the form, Bishop McKenzie began to improvise lyrics.

“Tell somebody,” he spoke, transitioning into a melody,

I got to trust Him
I got to love Him

49 Quotations come from Numbers 13:19, 27, and 32-33.

50 Romans 4:17: “(As it is written, I have made thee a father of many nations,) before him whom he believed, even God, who quickeneth the dead, and calleth those things which be not as though they were.”
I got to believe in Him
Cause He is the o-n-l-y help that I know

McKenzie’s melody was improvised, not the melody of “Give Myself Away.” As he sang, members of the congregation shouted out enthusiastically, “Go ahead, Bishop!” “Sing, Bishop!” “I know that’s right!” Others repeated his phrases in call and response fashion. The excitement built as he improvised two more verses.

“This is my new release,” McKenzie then spoke playfully, inspiring cheers and applause from the congregation. Two more times through the form McKenzie made up verses, and then he spoke, “You know I love how I get people who say, ‘Bishop, stick to preaching, you can’t sing.’ But I just want to tell you that the devil” [transitions back to melodic delivery]

Is a liar
Because I believe
I believe I can fly

At this lyric and melodic quotation of “I Believe I Can Fly”—an R. Kelly-penned song that became a big hit for the R&B star in 1996, but has since been adopted by several gospel artists—clapping, cheering, and shouting out encouragement. McKenzie played with the “believe I can fly” motive for another repetition through the changes, and members of the Praise Team gradually began singing behind him. Then they all came together singing the chorus of R. Kelly’s song,

I believe I can fly
I believe I can touch the sky
I think about it every night and day
Spread my wings and fly away

As the Praise Team continued the song, McKenzie shifted his persona from singer to preacher, saying,

51The song first appeared in 1996 on the soundtrack to Space Jam (Atlantic/Warner Sunset).
Matter of fact, what I want you to do on the way out [of church] today, 
Although you may think you can’t, tell the devil that ‘no matter what I’m going through I’m going to learn how to fly up over my problems.’ 
Tell somebody, ‘I’m going to raise myself over my circumstances.’

Shifting briefly back to song, McKenzie riffed on the lyrics,

Dream about it every night and day
I came to tell him, I’m going to take his song today

And then back in preaching mode with the Praise Team still singing behind him, McKenzie instructed the congregation, “You got to learn how to tell your devil—say, ‘devil, I believe I can fly!’” He punctuated this exhortation with a few more bars of singing and then Bishop McKenzie offered an “invitation”—what might be considered the altar call proper,

If you’re here today,
And you don’t know the Lord for the pardoning of your sins,
And you need to come to Him today…
I want you to come.

A few people made their way to the altar. McKenzie laid hands and prayed for them as the musicians and singers continued the song.

There is a fascinating confluence of sacred and secular, worship and entertainment, and levity and gravity in the events I have just described. Through an exploration of this confluence we can begin to unpack the layers of meaning embodied in the sounds of this altar call. There are three meeting places I want to explore—the place where sacred meets secular; the place where the song the instrumentalists were playing, “I Give Myself Away,” meets the song that Bishop McKenzie and the Praise Team were singing, “I Believe I Can Fly;” and the meeting place of levity and gravity embodied in Bishop McKenzie’s performance.

Sacred meets Secular

On the surface, Bishop McKenzie’s choice to sing an R&B hit during the altar call seems peculiar. Pastor Mary McKenzie says that by choosing to come forward during the
altar call “you make the most important decision you will ever make.” Members at Faith Assembly believe that coming to the altar to confess Jesus as your savior is a matter of life and death. Even after one has been saved, Bishop and Pastor McKenzie stress the importance of staying “covered” in prayer by an “anointed” spiritual leader. In one message Bishop McKenzie preached,

[The devil] wants you.
He wants to trick you.
The only reason he can’t is because the prayers of the righteous availeth much.52
See, you may have a decent mechanic,
A good doctor,
But you’ve got to have an awesome man and woman of God to pray for your spirit and your soul.
Say [McKenzie directs the congregation to speak towards him], “I don’t want you playing around when I need prayer…
“I want you to be sober and diligent about what I need for you to do.”53

So Faith Assembly’s congregation understands Bishop McKenzie’s August 28, 2011, invitation to “know the Lord for the pardoning of your sins” as an invitation to be literally saved from eternal damnation. The religious seriousness of the moment, however, seems to be disconnected from Bishop McKenzie’s playful rendition of a 1990s R&B hit. This is especially the case when one considers the cultural baggage that enters the frame through the figure of R. Kelly, the song’s composer and the first artist to perform and record it.

Kelly has had a highly successful career stretching back to the early 1990s. Like many R&B artists, his musical roots are planted in the church. He began singing in church in his hometown of Chicago at an early age. Following the path forged by Marvin Gaye in the 1960s and 70s, Kelly’s trademark has always been the combination of a gospel vocal

52 This phrase is a paraphrase of James 5:16: “Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.”

aesthetic with overtly sexual lyrics. And Kelly has often made this meeting place of sensual and sanctified the explicit focus of his songs—pushing well beyond precedents such as Gaye’s “Sanctified Lady” (1985), The Commodores’ “I Feel Sanctified” (1974), and the Bar-Kays’ “Holy Ghost” (1978). On “Tongues” (2010), Kelly boasts of his sexual prowess, “I got these honeys speaking in tongues.” The blatant conflation of spiritual and sexual ecstasy has been pervasive throughout his career from 1995’s “Religious Love” to 2009’s “Religious (Explicit Version).” Added to Kelly’s sexualized spiritual rhetoric is the controversy surrounding his personal life. A high-profile scandal involving a video of Kelly having sex with and urinating on a minor erupted in 2002 and continues to receive media attention.54

In the public imagination R. Kelly represents sex, sin, and scandal—qualities that sound a harsh dissonance against what most Spirit-filled Christians believe to be the purifying sanctification available during the altar call. By singing a song penned by Kelly during this crucial spiritual moment, it might seem that Bishop McKenzie was on shaky—perhaps even blasphemous—ground. Members at Faith Assembly recognize the devil as a constant presence—even, or perhaps especially, at church—and commonly express the belief that he stands ready to “infiltrate” the service. This possibility is most likely what led McKenzie to improvise the line, “I’m going to take his [i.e. the devil’s] song today.” McKenzie explicitly presents himself as a representative of “the church” who is taking a song that used to belong to “the world.” This is a powerful rhetorical move in the context of Spirit-filled worship. McKenzie is declaring “the victory” for God, who as the creator of all things

54 Even brief articles about the artist 10 years after the scandal surfaced make obligatory mention of it. See for example, Kia Macharechi, “R. Kelly ‘Share My Love’ Video: Crooner Continues to Live in the 1970s, Promote Branded Champagne Cognac,” The Huffington Post, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/04/19/r-kelly-share-my-love-video-lyrics_n_1438119.html.
gifted this song. But in the brokenness of creation this gift became mixed up with “the world” and coopted by ungodly forces. McKenzie’s statement represents for Spirit-filled believers a reclaiming for God what is rightfully His; a triumph of church over world. Interpreted in this light, the song fits perfectly within the ritual framework of the altar call. The song itself is going through a purifying ritual; a rededication to its true Originator and a rebirth experience. The song is being saved just like those people coming to the altar.

But this interpretation only begins to account for the layers of meaning in play during this particular altar call. There is certainly a semiotic significance to Bishop McKenzie’s “sacralizing” of a secular artist’s song during the altar call, but to say that this was intentional on McKenzie’s part would be to overstate the claim. He told me that he was “flowing in the anointing” when he began to sing “I Believe I Can Fly.” McKenzie said that he understood this moment as being less about symbolic resonance with the altar call ritual, and more about being receptive to the Holy Spirit in that particular moment. “That song was somebody’s Word [i.e. personal message from God] that day,” he told me, “It is what somebody needed. And the Holy Ghost knew how to bring it to pass.”

The theme expressed in the song’s lyrics was consonant with the message of McKenzie’s preached Word on that Sunday—one’s need to have a faith that transcends what looks possible. And this fits in with McKenzie’s claim that it was “somebody’s Word.” If his sermon about faith had had a special resonance for someone in the congregation, then

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55. “The Victory” is a key concept in Spirit-filled worship. Believers embrace the idea that, ultimately, God has already won; that the forces of good will, in the end, prevail over the forces of evil. Thus, believers often speak of small victories (like reclaiming a song for God) as manifestations of, or signs of the coming of, The Victory.

56. The idea of sanctifying secular music is, of course, nothing new. It brings to mind the quip often attributed to Martin Luther: “Why should the devil have all the good tunes?”


58. Ibid.
perhaps this song was what was needed to internalize that message—a chance for this
congregant to personally declare that what seems impossible is in fact possible: “I believe I
can fly.” And by declaring this in song, the congregant might transform that sentiment from a
mere idea into that more holistic kind of knowing that James K.A. Smith associates with the
“affective core.”

But perhaps this still begs the question, is a song written by R. Kelly really the best
way to internalize a belief in the power of one’s own faith? Perhaps not, if one’s experience
of the song really is bound up with R. Kelly’s authorship. But in the milieu of the black
Spirit-filled church, R. Kelly’s authorship may not be a central part of people’s experience of
this song. There is a powerful sense among these worshipers in which ownership of any
given song can be divorced from authorship. Above I’ve already touched on the Spirit-
filled Christian belief that God is the ultimate owner and author of everything, and thus an R.
Kelly-penned song can come to belong to the church because it is actually God’s song. But
even leaving aside supernatural omnipotence for the moment, any popular song is subject to
cultural ownership. Outside the bounds of copyright and legal formality, ownership of “I
Believe I Can Fly” is shared by people all across the world who imbue the song with a vast
range of cultural and personal meanings. Certainly the song has taken on a life of its own
among black Spirit-filled Christians.

The song has been performed by a number of prominent black Christian artists, most
notably Yolanda Adams. Adams is one of the most commercially successful female gospel

59Smith, Thinking in Tongues, 77.

60The complex relation between ownership and authorship has been a key theme in works by several prominent
music scholars researching a variety of traditions. See, for example, Simon Frith, “Music and Identity,” in
(New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); and Peter Manuel, “Composition, Authorship, and Ownership in
Flamenco, Past and Present,” Ethnomusicology 54/1 (Winter 2010), 106-135.
artists of the 21st century and the recipient of numerous awards including four Grammys. She has been performing “I Believe I Can Fly” for many years, including a much-viewed performance on the 2002 Concert for World Children’s Day televised on ABC, and duet recordings with Gerald Levert in 2001 and Kenny G in 2004. It is likely that many black Christians associate the song more with Adams than with Kelly. Of course, a simple association with Adams does not make the song unequivocally sacred—especially considering her duet partners whom many black pentecostals would consider secular artists—but much of Adams’ other work, unlike R. Kelly’s, is at home in the context of contemporary black Spirit-filled worship. To put it simply, performing a “Yolanda Adams song” in church is much safer than performing an “R. Kelly song.”

As an artist who is promoted and marketed primarily as a “Christian artist,” Adams is, 1) a manifestation of the resonance “I Believe I Can Fly” has found among many black believers, and 2) an active participant in increasing the song’s acceptability in church settings. And it has been widely adopted in many different churches. A search for the song on YouTube turns up dozens of amateur performances of “I Believe I Can Fly” in churches of varying cultural makeups—though the majority appear to be African American. Among the uploaded videos there are solo performances; choir arrangements; youth choir arrangements; liturgical dances and mime routines choreographed to the song; instrumental versions (even one featuring gospel harmonica); and sermons which take the title of the song. Some of these videos come from Sunday morning services and others from graduation celebrations or other special services (such as “Women’s Day”). Even at Faith Assembly,

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61 A video of the World Children’s Day performance is available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TPJ5kqjEQtc&feature=related. The Levert duet is the lead-off track of Adams’ 2001 release The Experience which also closes with a live version of the song. The Kenny G duet was included on the saxophonist’s 2004 release At Last... the Duets Album.
one of the graduating seniors from the church’s school—Faith Assembly Academy—sang a solo version of “I Believe I Can Fly” to an accompaniment track during a Sunday morning service a few months before Bishop McKenzie brought the song into the altar call. Another singer at the church—a former member of The Modulations, a moderately successful soul group who appeared on the TV show *Soul Train* in 1975—has sung solo renditions of “I Believe I Can Fly” on a few different occasions at Faith Assembly. All of this is to say that the song is a canonized part of the soundscape at Faith Assembly and many similar black churches.

The sound of Bishop McKenzie and Faith Assembly’s Praise Team singing “I Believe I Can Fly,” then, evokes layers of cultural and individual resonance. Enough of the layers are potentially inappropriate for the occasion—potentially heard by churchgoers as too secular—that McKenzie feels the need to declare that he is going to “take [the devil’s] song today.” But other layers are tied directly to church gatherings and worship experiences. The work that the song accomplished during the altar call of August 28, 2011—the way that it moved people, “spoke” to them, transmitted their “Word,” or carried something that they needed—is bound up with the tensions manifest in the interstices between these layers of cultural and personal meaning.

“I Believe I Can Fly” meets “I Give Myself Away”

When Bishop McKenzie began singing “I Believe I Can Fly” during the altar call of August 28, 2011 he opened a sonic pathway through which rich webs of cultural and personal significance—sacred and secular—were unleashed into the ritual event. But during this altar call there was also a different level of listening taking place. The band was actually playing a different song—a version of William McDowell’s recording “I Give Myself
Away.” In the preceding year or so this song had become an altar call standard at Faith Assembly. In some services the Praise Team had sung the song twice in a single service, once during the opening praise and worship portion of service and once during the closing altar call. Faith Assembly members had sung its chorus—“I give myself away / I give myself away / So you can use me”—over and over again, hundreds of times during the past year. Every regular attendee of Faith Assembly knew this song well. So when Bishop McKenzie began singing the lyrics of “I Believe I Can Fly” instead of “I Give Myself Away” it was not only unexpected but it also initiated a kind of dialectic between these two songs.

The lyrics of “I Give Myself Away” express a personal desire for the kind of selflessness Jesus asks of his disciples in the Gospels, perhaps most explicitly in Matthew 16:24-25: “…if any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever shall lose his life for my sake shall find it.” The lyrics to William McDowell’s verses and bridge say it like this:

Verse 1
Here I am, here I stand
Lord, my life is in your hands
Lord, I’m longing to see
Your desires revealed in me

Verse 2
Take my heart, take my life
As a living sacrifice
All my dreams, all my plans
Lord, I place them in your hands

Bridge
My life is not my own


63“I Give Myself Away” was also in heavy rotation on gospel radio at this time, so even first-time attendees—if gospel listeners—were likely to know the song.

To you I belong
I give myself, I give myself to you

These lyrics express the desire for (spiritual) death so that one might have (spiritual) life. Obviously this theme is what made the song such a popular choice for altar calls at Faith Assembly. The primary purpose of the altar call is to give those individuals who have this desire the opportunity to publicly make the commitment to lose their life so that they might find it. Implicit in this idea is the notion of the impotence of the human self. Only when dedicated to the Spirit do one’s “dreams,” “plans,” or accomplishments have meaning. What a human can do is essentially meaningless unless that human has been reborn in Christ.

But during the August 28 altar call, these lyrics were not sung out loud. They were, however, present in the service—in the minds of many congregants as well as in a number of spoken references to the song that Bishop McKenzie included in his prayers during the altar call. Given this, the contradictory nature of the themes of these two songs is significant. On the surface, R. Kelly’s song seems to express a polar opposite view of the human person in comparison to William McDowell’s. Kelly’s lyrics don’t deny the human self, but give it a superhuman agency.65 The juxtaposition of these two songs sonically embodies a tension that is rife in contemporary black Spirit-filled churches. This tension centers on desire—do the

65In the first verse of “I Believe I Can Fly,” Kelly does seem to suggest that this superhuman agency comes from a “higher” source: “I used to think that I could not go on / And life was nothing but an awful song / But now I know the meaning of true love / I'm leaning on the everlasting arms.” The fourth line in particular—which is the title and refrain of a hymn sung widely among black and white Christians in the US, and a reference to Deuteronomy 33:27—is likely a key factor in black Christians acceptance of the song in worship settings. However, the implication still remains that it is the “I” accomplishing superhuman feats, and the “everlasting arms” play a supportive rather than agential role. The last verse states, “There are miracles in life I must achieve / But first I know it starts inside of me.” In any case, during the altar call at Faith Assembly on August 28 only the chorus was sung, so for most listeners the content of Kelly’s verses existed only as a memory in the experiential background if it was present at all.
practices of contemporary churches form believers who desire the will of God, or do they form believers who desire their own will in the name of God?  

The use of a praise and worship format in many black churches exemplifies this tension. In this style of worship, music is presented in a concert-like fashion. A small group of skilled singers—usually called a Praise Team—sing to the congregation. Although the congregation is usually encouraged to sing along, the amplified voices of the Praise Team and their prominent position front and center in the church (often elevated on a platform or stage), clearly suggest a higher status. Is it a human desire for visibility and acclaim that leads singers to join a Praise Team? Or is the professionalization of worship music God’s will? Moreover, do churches who adopt a praise and worship format do so out of a desire to do God’s will or out of a human desire to attract members with high quality entertainment? These kinds of questions have been, and continue to be, vociferously debated. Many pastors, theologians, church leaders, gospel musicians, and churchgoers have filled books, blogs, and hours of conversation with their passionate opinions on these questions. Among black

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66Critiques of the prosperity gospel, for example, often claim that its message is nothing more than a validation of the basest human desires cloaked in the language of religion. Columbia University professor Frederick C. Harris, for example, calls it the “gospel of bling,” a “self-centered theology…that has underwritten the virtues of materialism.” See Harris, “Prosperity Gospel vs. The King Legacy,” The New York Times (February 2, 2012) http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2012/02/02/black-churches-and-a-new-generation-of-protest/prosperity-gospel-vs-martin-luther-kings-legacy. Bishop and Pastor McKenzie also regularly speak about the tension between human and divine desire. Pastor McKenzie often draws a distinction between “operating in flesh” and “operating in spirit.” On June 6, 2012 she preached, “…we keep having these fleshly experiences thinking it’s a move of God. It ain’t nothing but a move of your flesh. When it’s a move of God, you will know. Because everybody that’s truly operating in the spirit will get a revelation of what God is doing.”

67Deborah Smith Pollard discusses this tension at some length in a chapter entitled “‘Praise is What We Do’: The Rise of Praise and Worship in the Urban Church” in When the Church Becomes Your Party: Contemporary Gospel Music (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2008), 17-53.

Spirit-filled Christians like those at Faith Assembly, discussions of praise and worship frequently center on the tension between divine and human will. They recognize the potential of praise and worship to be used for expressing human, rather than divine, desire and note that it is often used that way. This, however, does not cause them to shy away from the praise and worship enterprise but leads them to emphasize the importance of intention, discernment, right living, and relationship with God.69

Praise and worship singing is just one example of the prevalent tension between human and divine will in contemporary black pentecostal worship.70 But it serves to illustrate the degree to which these believers allow such tension is allowed to stand. The line between these two types of desire—what someone wants and what God wants for someone—is rarely clear. And, according to many Spirit-filled believers, this is a dangerous but necessary situation.

On the one hand, believers say that the Bible makes it clear that what humans desire is often at odds with what God desires for them. To pursue a purely human desire in God’s

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69I have heard both Bishop and Pastor McKenzie suggest to the Praise Team that if any member is not “right with God” she should choose to “sit herself down” until her relationship is mended, and she should do this for the sake of the spiritual health of the church as a whole. On occasion this has, in fact, happened, with one member or another choosing to “sit down” for “a season.” On a related note, when I have given compliments to a singer in the course of my research, the receiver of the compliment has, in almost every case, refused to accept credit for his or her abilities, always deflecting to God. The most common response is, “To God be the glory.”

70Prophetic ministry—in the sense of foretelling rather than forthtelling—is another. Self-proclaimed prophets abound in contemporary black pentecostal circles. They range from those who do little more than employ fortune-teller-esque trickery to those who make extremely subtle proclamations with humility and poetry. I have heard a similar take on prophets and prophesy from dozens of pentecostals believers with whom I have spoken about the matter. Virtually all of them accept that God does in fact reveal accurate visions of the future to particular individuals. But they also acknowledge that there are many charlatans out there, and that, even among those who do truly have the gift of prophecy, mistakes do happen—resulting from the operations of the devil or the simple yet inescapable fact of human limitation. Despite their recognition of its imperfections, many believers do not shy away from prophetic ministry. They do, however, stress the need to draw on scripture, prayer, and spiritual discernment in assessing prophecy. Through this process believers may choose to “receive” or “reject” a particular prophecy.
name, Bishop McKenzie says, is to create a false idol. Furthermore, if one has been saved and baptized by the Holy Ghost, one possesses spiritual power that can easily be misused. Bishop McKenzie critiqued a common catch phrase used by prominent Word of Faith preachers when he preached that “‘name it and claim it’ is one of the most dangerous ideas out there.” Making a point akin to the folk wisdom of “be careful what you ask for because you just might get it,” McKenzie was warning believers that using Holy Ghost power without discernment or deliberation could have dire consequences.

On the other hand, however, the tendency to assume that all apparently human desires exist outside the will of God can, Pastor Mary McKenzie claims, “cause you to miss what God has for your life.” She says,

[God’s] got some things prepared for you…Things mean houses, cars, money. Those are things. God said you can’t even imagine. But the devil keeps telling you, because you ain’t this or you ain’t that or you won’t born in a certain family, you can’t have these things. But the devil is a liar.

According to this reasoning, once one has been saved, sanctified, and filled with the Holy Ghost, a desire for personal success and financial gain may be part of God’s will. If one assumes this could not be the case simply because such desires too closely resemble pre-salvation desires, he or she risks being disobedient to God. Leaders at Faith Assembly stress that a believer must rely on prayer, fasting, and the study of scripture to discern God’s will. And when God reveals His “assignment,” one is responsible—and will be held

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71 On May 6, 2012, Bishop McKenzie preached: “What is it…or who is it that’s more important in your life than God? Whatever it is, it’s an idol. It could be your car. It could be your husband. It could be your wife. It could really be your children. It could be anything that takes you from God. It could be a job. [A job] that takes you from God. And anything that you make an idol out of, it takes you from the very heart of God.”

72 Bishop Leroy McKenzie, FACC, April 15, 2012.

73 Pastor Mary McKenzie, FACC, February 24, 2013.

74 Ibid.
accountable—for acting on this revelation. According to the McKenzies’ teaching, “I Give Myself Away” is only part of the equation; true Christian discipleship also requires “I Believe I Can Fly.”

For believers at Faith Assembly an individual Christian’s life must be balanced between the poles of self-surrender and self-assertion. But preached messages, prayers, and exhortations rarely touch on the idea of balance. They usually draw on the rhetorical power of either/or propositions—Spirit or flesh; God or man; the Holy Ghost or the devil. In the soundscapes of worship, however, more complicated relationships emerge. The quasi-mashup of “I Give Myself Away” and “I Believe I Can Fly” during the August 28, 2011 altar call transmitted a particular understanding of the balance between self-surrender and self-assertion. This was not a tortuous explanation of how such balance is possible, but rather an improvised “choreography of sound” that could reach believers’ “affective cores” and allow them to “internalize meaning.”75 All those present—those creating the sound and those only hearing it—participated in a performance of a kind of knowledge resembling that expressed in the third chapter of Ecclesiastes: “To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up” and so on. In this way, the altar call took on a broad range of meanings that could reach congregants in various stages of their spiritual life. The soundscape in the sanctuary “said” that this was not just an opportunity for the unsaved to “give themselves away,” but also an opportunity for the saved to make a new commitment to assert themselves toward their callings.

75Daniels, “‘Gotta Moan Sometime,’” 26; and Smith, Thinking in Tongues, 77.
The simultaneous performance of “I Give Myself Away” and “I Believe I Can Fly” allowed meanings associated with both of those songs to coexist. This, in turn, allows new meanings to emerge which are inextricably tied to the specific context of Faith Assembly’s altar call. In addition to the confluence of songs and ritual, however, Bishop McKenzie added another layer of meaning through his performance style.

*Gravity meets Levity*

The sounds of Faith Assembly’s August 28 altar call were a meeting place for the sacred and the secular as well as for self-assertion and self-surrender. Just as important, though, they were a meeting place for gravity and levity. Focusing closely on Bishop McKenzie’s voice during this altar call offers a means through which to explore how and why he combined silliness and seriousness, entertainment and worship, and irony and pathos.

The altar call at Faith Assembly is a weighty ritual. It is the moment when believers say that people’s lives can be saved, when they can come forward and choose salvation over damnation. It is also a time when Bishop McKenzie prays for already-saved members who come forward to be healed, delivered, or otherwise transformed. People’s lives are at stake. Despite this weight, however, Bishop McKenzie often injects lightness into the occasion. During the altar call of August 28, 2011 there was near constant interplay between gravity and levity.

McKenzie initiated the altar call with the rhetorical cue: “We want to pray before we go.” The musicians began playing the changes to “I Give Myself Away,” thus facilitating the transition from The Word to the altar call. But no one had yet come forward or been invited forward. And instead of calling someone up and beginning to pray for her as he often does, McKenzie began to sing. He created a kind of in-between space, neither the Word nor the
altar call. It was more like a solo performance. And for Faith Assembly’s members the idea of McKenzie singing a solo provides an immediate injection of humor. By no means is he an incapable singer, but neither is he a practiced one. At a church where a number of members have considerable vocal talents, playful grimaces and eyebrow-raised glances are exchanged across the congregation when McKenzie begins to sing. There is a mild tension that permeates the church in these moments which usually leads to McKenzie singing a phrase or two, “laughing it off,” and then returning to speech. But on August 28, McKenzie was not deterred. He forged ahead, improvising line after line, and as he did, the congregation became not only amused but also encouraging. His prayer-like sentiments—“I got to trust Him, I got to believe in Him”—received confirming responses—“I know that’s right!” “Amen!” After multiple improvised verses McKenzie stated “this is my new release,” sending the congregation into fits of cheering and applause.

With this statement McKenzie was, in essence, announcing that he was playing a character; he was performing the role of “gospel singer.” And like a gospel singer he was doing something that was meant to be both entertainment and ministry. Having made the announcement, he embraced the role, singing with more gusto and provoking more passionate responses from the congregation. McKenzie was clearly having fun, and as he continued to do so the congregation was having fun with him. Certainly, we were all smiling in the band pit, and we were all enjoying the anticipation of following the next move of McKenzie’s improvised performance.

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76 McKenzie once told me in conversation that when he first began preaching God spoke to him one night and told him “just as clear as anything” that his mission was to “teach, train, and entertain.” In other words, even when he is not performing a character, McKenzie embraces the idea that ministry and entertainment are inextricably intertwined aspects of his calling.
When McKenzie commented that people told him to “stick to preaching because you can’t sing,” he was light-heartedly putting all of the glancing-eyed people in the congregation “on the spot,” drawing them further into the performance. And just as he created this tension, he transitioned into “I Believe I Can Fly,” provoking an eruption of applause, shouts of encouragement, and laughter from the congregation.

McKenzie mobilized multiple interactive meanings as he transitioned into this song. First, the song resonates with the theme of his preceding message—that through faith one can accomplish seemingly impossible things. This kind of faith, for McKenzie, is practiced through positive thinking. “You aren’t altogether your real problem,” McKenzie said towards the end of his sermon, “your problem is really your thinking… If you think you can you will, if you think you can’t, you won’t.” “I Believe I Can Fly” clearly fits in with this motivational speaker-style emphasis on positive thinking. It also affords McKenzie the opportunity to actually perform this kind of thinking. People have often told him “you can’t sing,” but by continuing on with the song he chooses to believe that he can, despite what “people” have said. In his running commentary as he sings, McKenzie connects the song to his preached message on another level as well, using the word “fly” not only as a metaphor for accomplishment, but also for transcendence of “the world.” As the Praise Team repeats the song’s chorus, McKenzie says, “tell the devil that no matter what I’m going through I’m going to learn how to fly up over my problems. Tell somebody ‘I’m going to raise myself over my circumstances.’” The song thus becomes a way for McKenzie to perform the themes of faith, positive thinking, and transcendence.

Second, Bishop McKenzie’s singing of “I Believe I Can Fly” indexes the cultural associations connected to the song’s status as a favorite for amateur performance. The song is
commonplace at talent shows and graduations (recall the graduating high school senior who had recently sung the song at Faith Assembly). At least four different contestants have performed the song on *American Idol*, and one can find dozens of videos on YouTube of people singing it on *Idol*-like televised contests from all around the world; this in addition to videos of a number of purely amateur performances in school gymnasiums and auditoriums. While some of these performances are great, “I Believe I Can Fly” is a song that is often butchered. Musically, many people who sing this song really can’t “fly,” no matter how deeply they believe they can.

In a sense, McKenzie is just another amateur. What McKenzie has that some of these amateurs may lack, however, is self-awareness. Through his comments about people telling him he can’t sing he makes his performance lighthearted—he continues singing the song not because he is bringing forth a great rendition but because he is having fun being an amateur pretending to be a professional (“this is my new release.”) This embrace of amateurism casts his motivational speaker-like conclusion to his preached message—“If you think you can, you will; if you think you can’t, you won’t”—in an interesting interpretive light. A steady stream of commentators and bloggers vociferously critique the use of these kinds of simplistic formulations among contemporary pentecostal preachers, claiming that they substitute feel-good emotionalism for what should be a challenging call to biblical righteousness. Bishop McKenzie commonly employs these kinds of statements, but in this instance, by setting himself up as another amateur singer of “I Believe I Can Fly,” he

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performs a subtext to his message. Even though he is employing the power of positive thinking and actively believing that he is a singer, clearly he has not been magically transformed into a vocal virtuoso. There are particular limitations with which any human must contend. “You may be able to fly,” the sound of McKenzie’s singing voice implies, “but you fly in your own way. Faith will not make you an instant gospel superstar, but it will allow you to forge ahead despite your limitations. And it just may allow some measure of well-being and joy while forging.” All of this subtext emerges not from McKenzie’s words, but from the sound of his voice. It is a performed sonic message that provides a crucial balance to his spoken message.

McKenzie thus uses his performance of “I Believe I Can Fly” to provide both support for and critical commentary on his preached message. He uses the performance in a third way as well—as a vehicle for a broader, and intentionally humorous, cultural commentary. By imitating common performance practices of famous black pop singers, McKenzie gently pokes fun at the gospel singer’s form of ministry while simultaneously employing that same method of ministry. Through this imitation he exposes the apparent absurdity of mixing secular entertainment values with the seriousness of the salvific moment of the altar call. With this act of exposing, however, he goes some distance in diffusing this absurdity—in his words, making clear that the service is not merely “entertainment” even if it is “entertaining.”

78There is a long history of this kind of playfulness among African American Christian performers. The 1958 recording “Let’s Go Out to the Programs” by gospel quartet group The Dixie Hummingbirds provides one prominent example. In the recording the Hummingbirds mimic many of the famous quartets of their day. In doing so, they: 1) gently poke fun at the other groups, 2) prove their own versatility and virtuosity, and 3) combine the goals of ministry and entertainment. Contemporary Christian comedians like Marcus D. Wiley continue the tradition of jesting preachers, gospel singers, and the like as part of their self-described “ministry.”

79I have heard McKenzie make this distinction on many different occasions when his preached message veered away from homily and toward comedy.
Bolstered by the congregation’s enthusiastic response following his transition into “I Believe I Can Fly,” McKenzie begins to loosen up and becomes increasingly playful with his vocal delivery. He repeats “I believe” four times, shifting his phrasing and timbre, and climbing in pitch. “Go ahead, Bishop! Go ahead!” a woman in the congregation yells out. At the end of the next line (“I think about it every night and day”) McKenzie inserts a punctuating “nnyeah,” the kind of nasal gospel grunt used liberally—excessively, perhaps—by the well-respected but often-parodied gospel luminary Rance Allen. McKenzie then changes the following line (what would have been “I spread my wings and fly away”) into “And I think about it, yeah, nnnmneeeway,” fully “Rancifying” the last word (‘anyway’) and milking it for maximum comedic value.

Rance Allen has been a mainstay of the gospel music industry since the early 1970s. Although he has always openly proclaimed his Christian faith, he has freely incorporated what most black listeners would consider secular styles—especially soul and funk—and flirted with crossover success. As a performer, Allen is less explicitly evangelistic than some of his gospel singing counterparts, and onstage he seems comfortable allowing his identity as an entertainer to coexist with his identity as a minister-in-song. Allen’s work is also well-known among the congregation at Faith Assembly. He has performed at the church in person on at least one occasion. When Bishop McKenzie imitates Allen’s vocal gestures, then, he is performing “gospel entertainer” while simultaneously acting as serious leader of worship.

80 Allen is known for incorporating antics into his guitar solos such as the Chuck Berry-inspired duckwalk and Jimi Hendrix-style behind-the-head playing. In the 1970s the Rance Allen Group played frequently as the only gospel group on a bill of secular artists (usually including Stax labelmates such as Isaac Hayes). Bil Carpenter, author of Uncloudy Days: The Gospel Music Encyclopedia, claims that the Rance Allen Group’s music was “strategically designed to appeal to an unchurched black audience.” See Uncloudy Days (San Francisco: Backbeat Books, 2005), 14. On Allen’s vocal style, Carpenter wrote in a review of Allen’s performance on a Bob Dylan tribute album, “Also falling short is the ridiculous over-emoting of Rance Allen (who is known for this annoying quality) on ‘When He Returns.’ At times, he’s so busy riffing and singing rings around himself that one can’t even understand the lyrics…” Carpenter, “Gotta Serve Somebody: The Gospel of Bob Dylan,” Goldmine 29/11 (May 30, 2003), 52, 59.
McKenzie takes this performance of “entertainer” even further as the Praise Team takes over the repetitions of “I Believe I Can Fly’s” chorus, providing him improvisational freedom over their foundation. He shifts from Rance Allen into timbral territory somewhere between Barry White, Isaac Hayes, and James Cleveland, riffing on the words “I believe” before moving to a low baritone melisma on the word “fly.” In many respects this kind of vocal gesture is anachronistic and un-gospel. Since James Cleveland’s popularity was superseded by younger gospel singers in the 1980s, very few famous male gospel lead vocalists have distinguished themselves with rumbling low-range delivery. Fluid tenors are much more common. And even Cleveland’s style rarely slipped into the kind of sultriness with which McKenzie intoned “fly.” With this kind of singing, Bishop McKenzie—who at around 60-years-old is well acquainted with black pop singers of decades past—invokes the sound of a 1970s soul crooner.

McKenzie is overtly performing. He is clearly trying to be entertaining and funny. But more than mere comedic folly, I want to suggest that he is using this performance to offer different levels of critical commentary. McKenzie exploits the tension inherent in that fuzzy and shifting boundary between sacred and secular by not only singing a song with many secular associations, but by doing so with obvious entertainment stylings. The commentary implicit in his singing deftly traverses a complicated terrain. He simultaneously mocks—albeit gently—Christians who are too “shallow” and those who are too “deep.”

The sound of McKenzie’s voice says that he knows there is something a bit ridiculous about using music and performance practice that is so closely related to entertainment and

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81 The warning not to be “too deep” is a constant refrain from Bishop McKenzie. On November 13, 2011, for example, he told the congregation, “Ya’ll got to stop being so deep when you come to church. If you want a real deep preacher, you’re in the wrong place.” On October 9, 2011, he said, “You know God is simple, He never was complicated. Now I thank God that I don’t have a lot of education, because if I did, I’d be so deep that you wouldn’t know where I was at.”
claiming that it is unequivocally worship. But he is also saying that anyone who says you
can’t worship that way is wrong. Embedded in his performance is a kind of history of
Sanctified religion. Zora Neale Hurston called the Sanctified Church a “protest against the
highbrow tendency in Negro Protestant congregations…”82 Black pentecostals have always
performed implicit critiques against an assumed spiritual-elitism of their more “refined”
Christian neighbors. At the same time, black pentecostals have a history of vehemently
rejecting the world while using its means—television and radio, for example—to spread the
Word. Coupled with this, they have a history of knowing that, even while pastors preached a
stark separation of church and world, many churchgoers—especially musicians—were often
playing on both sides of the fence.

By allowing levity and gravity to stand together, McKenzie, and the congregation
who support and encourage him, acknowledge and implicitly critique some of the imperfect
ways in which very imperfect humans have chosen to worship a Creator that they believe to
be perfect. Believers are clear that, ultimately, the spiritual goals of the altar call are of grave
consequence. At the same time, too much solemnity risks overemphasizing the power of
humans and human-created rituals. The “joy of the Lord” can perhaps ring truer when
lightness and heaviness are allowed to mingle in the course of worship.

In the preceding exploration of the August 28, 2011 altar call I have attempted to
open up layers of meaning that are created and transmitted through sound. As the competing
poles of sacred and secular, self-denial and self-assertion, and gravity and levity push against
one another, an ongoing commentary in sound mediates the tension. Using sound to structure
the investigation reveals the complex, and more balanced (as compared to the black-and-

white rhetoric common in pentecostal settings) meanings that are potentially in play during any instance of contemporary Spirit-filled worship.

In worship—particularly during an altar call—believers at Faith Assembly use sound to articulate a range of meanings and possible interpretations. Other potential entities for analysis—the text of preached messages, for example—do not lend themselves to showing this range of meaning in the same way. Often preached messages present propositions, statements where pastor and congregants must either agree or disagree. But by exploring sound in more depth, we realize that pastor and congregation are often working together, creating and negotiating shared understandings (or “understandings of understandings,” as James K.A. Smith puts it), many of which allow for ambivalence and complexity.

In the final case study of this chapter I am going to continue this line of analysis, turning attention toward the concept of time. The case study will show how, through sound, worshipers often enact and embody a powerful sense of historical grounding in cultural tradition and biblical narrative, despite the fact that Faith Assembly’s leaders frequently proclaim that the church should maintain a focus on the future and not the past. While the first two case studies centered on song as a primary sonic vehicle, the third will examine a segment of a worship service where song shares the stage with other modes of musical practice and sound, including silence.

CASE STUDY 3: Re-Sounding the Past in the Present

Bishop and Pastor McKenzie’s preached messages often forcefully exalt the future and renounce the past. They declare with equal triumph that “old things have passed away”

83 In his analysis of the “practice and experience” of pentecostal testimony, James K.A. Smith claims that one of his goals is to “consider the inchoate ‘understanding of understanding’ at work in the pentecostal claim that ‘I know that I know that I know.’” Smith, Thinking in Tongues, 52.
and that believers will be exalted “in due time.”\textsuperscript{84} The extent to which members of Faith Assembly value newness is reflected in their very decision to join a church that is less than 20 years old and has no denominational affiliation. As recounted in Chapter 1, Bishop Leroy McKenzie’s idea to found the church was a direct result of the murder of his 17-year-old nephew—a victim of street violence. Faith Assembly’s very genesis was bound up with a desire to break away from a grim past. While many Christian congregations recite the same creeds as their ancestors and participate in rituals structured to intimately and explicitly reflect centuries of historical precedent, Faith Assembly chooses instead to direct their religious practices toward the future. Echoing the rhetoric of prominent black mega-pastors and televangelists such as TD Jakes, Faith Assembly celebrates the blessings of well-being, prosperity, healing, “new levels,” and “breakthroughs” that await faithful believers somewhere on the road ahead. “The Best is yet to Come,” they sing, “It’s A New Season.” We’re “Moving Forward.”\textsuperscript{85}

Faith Assembly’s musical repertoire—composed primarily of songs released as popular recordings in the last ten or fifteen years—stands as a strong indicator of the value they place on newness. But as I discussed in the first case study, sometimes a service moves away from the standard order of events—what Pastor Garry Mitchell often calls “protocol.” When this kind of temporal space is opened, and the congregation uses music to collectively move into experiential spaces where they believe that the Holy Spirit makes “all things new,”

\textsuperscript{84}2 Corinthians 5:17—“Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things have passed away; behold, all things are become new.” 1 Peter 5—“Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time.”

\textsuperscript{85}These are the titles of popular contemporary gospel songs that have been performed frequently at Faith Assembly. Each of these songs has also been used by the church’s leaders as the thematic basis for a sermon (or sermons) and/or one of the church’s annual conferences. “New Season,” Israel and New Breed, \textit{New Season}, 2001, Integrity Media; “The Best is Yet to Come,” Donald Lawrence & The Tri-City Singers, \textit{Go Get Your Life Back}, 2002, EMI/Chordant; and “Moving Forward,” Hezekiah Walker & The Love Fellowship Crusade Choir, \textit{Souled Out}, 2008, Verity.
they frequently abandon this repertoire and create more improvisatory sounds that resonate with cultural traditions and biblical narratives. This case study offers an analysis of an approximately 20 minute segment of a single worship service in which an improvised musical journey led from a contemporary gospel recording, through several musical moments that drew on longstanding black church traditions, to something like an impromptu reenactment of the scene which begins the second chapter of Acts. Sonically-driven moments like this one offer a means through which believers can embody a holistic knowledge of the past that adds complexity to the content of preached messages at Faith Assembly; messages that often rhetorically place the past and future at irreconcilable odds.

January 9, 2011, Approximately 10:20am

Following “protocol” closely, Pastor Garry Mitchell, the Master of Ceremonies (MC), introduces a group of five women to dance a choreographed dance to a recording of “Expect the Great” by Jonathan Nelson. Enacting the lyrics of the up-tempo song with enthusiastic synchronized movements, the dancers stir the congregation, bringing most of them to their feet. As the recording fades out and the dance concludes, the band begins to reprise the vamp from the end of the song and Pastor Garry takes the stage. He leads the congregation in singing the lyrics from the vamp – repetitions of “the blessing is on you.” The congregants’ voices fill the sanctuary and Pastor Garry interjects with exhortations and words of praise. Even after the MC concludes the song, the musicians sonically linger with sustained notes and shimmering cymbals. Congregants continue moving their bodies, many of them crying out “hallelujah!” or “thank you, Jesus!” The musicians’ swelling sounds soon transform into the distinctive double-time rhythms of black pentecostal shout music. Congregants begin dancing ecstatically as they experience an infilling of the Holy Spirit. After several minutes

of shouting, Pastor Garry motions to the musicians to “break” the music, bringing the 100-
plus decibels pounding from the church’s sound system to a dramatic halt. Immediately, the
soundscape is saturated with the voices of congregants speaking in tongues, praying and
giving thanks. Beneath these voices, the keyboardist begins to improvise softly, gradually
establishing a pattern over which Pastor Garry improvises lyrics. He sings a refrain
acknowledging the Holy Spirit, “We come into Your presence, right now, to worship You.”

After a few improvised verses and many repetitions of this refrain, Pastor Garry
leaves the constraints of language behind and begins to simply hum the melody. Humming,
he leads the song, measure by measure, toward silence. He speaks softly as the music
gradually dies away. Then he shushes into the microphone, “ssshhhhhhh,” “ssshhhhhhhhh,”
“ssshhhhhhh,” and instructs the congregation to “be still.” There is a moment of almost total
silence and then ripples of murmuring prayer and tongues speech fill the congregation.
Twenty minutes have passed since the conclusion of the women’s dance.

This moment of collective prayer and tongues speech felt like a moment of arrival –
the telos of a 20 minute journey away from protocol. Moving from a contemporary gospel
recording through various kinds of improvised music, Faith Assembly reached back into the
biblical past to create a soundscape that resonated with the description of the spiritual
takeover in the second chapter of Acts. In order to have such a resonance, the moment had to
be unplanned.87 James K.A. Smith reminds us that the “inbreaking of the Spirit” experienced
by the Apostles in the book of Acts “was not something that was anticipated or

87 Even though it was unplanned, I would not argue that this moment was necessarily unexpected. In fact, there
is much evidence to suggest that culturally-scripted expectations play a key role in musically-facilitated ecstatic
experience. See, for example, Judith Becker’s Deep Listeners: Music, Emotion, and Trancing (Bloomington,
IN: Indiana University Press, 2004). See also footnote 23 below.
predelineated.” Thus, the moment of arrival had to be achieved rather than scripted. In the process of this achieving, Faith Assembly’s believers enacted and embodied key elements of their theology including the significance of the deep congregational unity known as “one accord,” the interplay of faith and work, and the idea of “radical openness” to the “continuing operations of the Spirit.” While these concepts may instruct what happens inside of the preset order of events, they come to be known by worshipers on a deeper level as they emerge, through sound, in the temporal spaces outside the bounds of protocol.

The segment began with a choreographed dance performed to the 2010 recording “Expect the Great.” This dance was pre-planned. But when the recording was reprised by the church’s musicians and Pastor Garry led the congregation in repetitions of the last refrain, the church collectively made a commitment to move away from the familiarity of protocol. By itself, this initial commitment was not particularly remarkable. Similar things happen in most services. Most pentecostals consider a service that does not go some way towards venturing outside of a predetermined structure to be “dry” and ineffective. But in this instance the service did not return to protocol after a few minutes away as it commonly does. Instead the church continued to go deeper “in.”

“Going in”—meaning “in” to the Holy Spirit’s presence—is how Pastor Garry describes what happens in intensified moments of worship. The phrase is not Pastor Garry’s own but a commonly invoked description of experience among black pentecostals. This

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89 Glenn Hinson’s writes of “one accord”: “Such deep devotion never “just happens.” Rather it must be actively achieved.” Glenn Hinson, *Fire in My Bones*, 89 (emphasis in original).

90 Smith, *Thinking in Tongues*, 12.

91 James K.A. Smith writes, “One of the reasons pentecostal spirituality is so often linked to spontaneity is that pentecostal worship makes room for the unexpected. Indeed, we might say that, for pentecostals, the unexpected is expected. The surprising comes as no surprise.” Smith, *Thinking in Tongues*, 33.
evocative concept provides a window into the pentecostal experience of Spirit-filled worship. The idea of “going in” implies some volition on the part of the goer—to some extent one must choose to go in and choose to come out. But this creates a possible conflict in terms of agency. In moments of experiential intensity Pastor Garry often affirms that “there has been a shift,” or that “the Holy Ghost is in charge of the program.” On the surface it seems that these claims would imply that human volition is irrelevant. But Pastor Garry’s simultaneous emphasis on “going in” makes the situation more complex. His often stern exhortations that congregants participate physically imply that human will is a crucial factor in the process of entering into a holy presence. For example, in one service Pastor Garry chanted emphatically,

Sometimes God comes in and He shifts things, but you’ve got to be ready for the shift.
Lift up those hands and look unto Him from which cometh your help.
God is trying to get something to you …
God is about to make some stuff happen in your life …
But you got to come out of yourself, and begin to lift up holy hands, and let go and let God in this place.
Lift up those hands, lift up those hands, Come on!
Lift up those hands all over the building! Come on!
And just cry out to Him! …
Lift them up!
Begin to just wave them!
Everybody on one accord, come on! …
Manifestation is taking place.
Healing is taking place.
Deliverance is taking place.
If you want something from God,
You stretch out on Him right now! Come on!
You stretch out on Him! …
Somebody that loves God give Him some real praise in this place.
Oh, come on, give Him some real praise, don’t pattycake Him.\textsuperscript{92}

To go into the Holy Spirit’s presence, then, takes work. Even if the Spirit moves powerfully during a service, the congregation still must collectively “press in [His] presence”

\textsuperscript{92}Pastor Garry Mitchell, Faith Assembly Christian Center, February 20, 2011.
as one popular song puts it.\textsuperscript{93} Individually, worshipers must be willing to offer a “sacrifice of praise”; to “present [their] bodies” to God and to praise Him with the “fruit of [their] lips” even at the risk of looking silly or losing control of their “natural” selves.\textsuperscript{94} This is all part of a process of creating the state of one accord which figures as a key component of the Spirit-filled imagination. In his account of “transcendence and the Holy Spirit in African American gospel,” Glenn Hinson writes that “one accord” is “something far deeper than a simple state of harmony. When the saints speak of ‘coming to accord,’ they mean recreating in spirit and mood the focused reverence that prevailed among the apostles on the day of Pentecost.”\textsuperscript{95}

As believers work to establish “one accord” among the individuals that make up the congregation—a prerequisite to entering into the depths of God’s presence—they are simultaneously working to connect themselves to the biblical past. Following Glenn Hinson, we can understand “one accord” not simply as a state of unity among a group of worshipers in the present, but also a state of unity with the past; with the “radical” believers of the early Christian church.

According to Faith Assembly’s believers, the extent to which “one accord” is established correlates to how deep “in” the congregation can go. Believers liken the Holy Spirit’s presence to an immersive substance – something like the ocean. The deeper the congregation goes, the more they encounter wonders that cannot exist at the surface. At the same time, going deeper takes preparation and work, and it requires that they be able to withstand increasing pressure. Many times Faith Assembly ventures away from protocol only


\textsuperscript{94}Faith Assembly’s scriptural basis for the idea of a “sacrifice of praise” comes from Jeremiah 17:26; Romans 12:1 and Hebrews 13:15 which is also the scripture from which the terminology “fruit of our lips” comes.

\textsuperscript{95}Hinson, \textit{Fire in My Bones}, 89.
momentarily, wading in the shallows of spiritual presence. If we zoom in on the transition to shout music I described briefly above, we see that this kind of wading is what appeared to be happening on January 9, 2011. But the insistence of the organist and the moving bodies of the congregation eventually spurred the service further toward the deep.

After the musicians reprised “Expect the Great” and Pastor Garry led the congregation in collective repetitions of the song’s refrain for about two minutes, he signaled for a cadence and the music temporarily ceased. Pastor Garry continued with heightened exhortations while the congregation clapped and cheered, but after about a minute of this, he began speaking as if he were returning to protocol and even asked for the lights to be turned on. (Faith Assembly uses theater-style lighting during Praise Team singing and choreographed dances, and overhead fluorescent lighting for most other parts of the service. The switch from one to the other visually emphasizes the demarcation of different segments of the service). Many congregants remained standing, moving their bodies, seeming to feel aftershocks from the wave of congregational accord they had just experienced while singing together. Brother Wade, the Hammond organist, began a series of repetitive licks that sonically suggested shout music and disregarded Pastor Garry’s rhetorical moves toward protocol. Following this lead, Pastor Garry started moving his body with subtle Holy Dance-like gestures, and Brother Sylvester, the drummer, entered with a high-hat crescendo starting with the cymbals closed tightly and gradually increasing in volume while allowing the cymbals to separate, creating a swell of white noise. Pastor Garry screamed “Somebody’s going to catch on fire in a minute!” Taking this as his cue, Brother Vince entered with chromatic eighth notes on the bass and I followed with choppy dominant ninth chords on the guitar. Brother Sylvester brought in the characteristic kick/snare alternation. With the shout
music in full bloom, Pastor Garry danced front and center in the church and yelled into the microphone, “Somebody better help me praise Him!” All across the congregation people were dancing with their own “shouts.” The music continued for about five minutes morphing through five or six variations on the basic pattern with Pastor Garry periodically voicing loud encouragements into the microphone.

As the church shouted, church members’ cultural and religious pasts became much more present in the service. Most African American pentecostals who grew up in church recognize shouting as a fundamentally traditional activity. Many contemporary believers remember seeing their mother, grandmother, and perhaps even great-grandmother dancing the Holy Dance in church. And the sound of shout music brings years of accrued personal and cultural memory to the surface. Much has been written about the extent to which sound is deeply interwoven with memory.96 A few bars of a popular recording that one once listened to with a first lover can trigger waves of emotion and rekindle the very feelings experienced “way back when.” For black pentecostals the sound of shout music runs through generations of shared ecstatic and transcendent experience. Although new variations and new harmonic and melodic patterns are continually mixed with more traditional sounds, shout music retains a core rhythmic identity that some believe traces back to the ring shout practiced by slaves; a practice likely brought over from West Africa.97 In the shouting

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96 For examples of scholarly works for which memory is a central concern see Earle Waugh, Memory, Music, and Religion: Morocco’s Mystical Chanters (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2005); or the essays in Karin Bijsterveld and Jose van Dijck, eds., Sound Souvenirs: Audio Technologies, Memory and Cultural Practices (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009).

97 Scholars such as Samuel Floyd have placed great emphasis on the practice of the ring shout and its generative power not only in the creation of religious music, but all African American music. See Floyd, The Power of Black Music: Interpreting its History from Africa to the United States (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).
moment, then, the spiritual ecstasy of going “deeper in” is densely interwoven with tradition and cultural memory.

On January 9, 2011 shouting was not the end of Faith Assembly’s extended venture away from protocol. In a particularly potent moment Pastor Garry signaled for the musicians to “break”—or abruptly stop—the shout music. This is a common tactic among leaders of black pentecostal worship, used in part to test the intensity of the anointing and the zeal of the praisers.\textsuperscript{98} Will the congregation continue dancing, clapping and crying out to God even without the foundation and cover of music? Will they allow themselves to be exposed, with attention now directed to their own voices and movements rather than the overwhelming volume coming from the speakers? Very often this is a short test, maybe lasting a few seconds. If the congregation’s praise continues in the absence of music, then the musicians will reenter and go on with the shout music. In this particular instance, however, shout music did not return. The break in the music revealed a soundscape in which congregants were not merely clapping and praising, but fervently crying out, weeping and speaking in tongues. One woman’s voice rang out above the others, “I thank you, Lord. For every breath that I breathe! For every breath that I breathe! You didn’t have to do it, but you did. You didn’t have to do it, but you did!” For close to a minute the musicians laid out. And rather than returning with shout music, the keyboardist began softly playing a progression in a minor mode. With gravitas, Pastor Garry spoke into the microphone, “We’ve done tapped into some worship.”

This declaration is a powerful one for believers at Faith Assembly. They commonly pit “praise” against “worship,” declaring the latter to be a deeper state of devotion. A praise

\textsuperscript{98}For a detailed discussion of this practice in a black Holiness church see, William Dargan, “Congregation Gospel Songs in a Black Holiness Church: A Musical and Textual Analysis,” (PhD diss., Wesleyan University, 1983).
and worship handbook written by Dr. Leonard Scott, the founder of black gospel record label Tyscot, draws on the language of Psalm 100 to characterize a three-tiered progression—moving from thanksgiving, to praise, to worship—that leads deeper into the presence of God.

Coming through the first barrier to His presence, the gates, is to be accompanied with thanksgiving. We leave the gates and proceed into His courts with praise. Then we go into His very presence with worship as we bless His name.99

Pastor Garry’s words “we’ve done tapped into some worship” thus announced that Faith Assembly had entered “His very presence,” what believers sometimes call the “Holy of holies.”100 For about seven minutes Pastor Garry improvised a song, returning again and again to the refrain, “We come into Your presence, right now, to worship You.” At times, members of the Praise Team accompanied him in harmony. The congregation “caught” the refrain, and for a few repetitions he held the microphone toward them, focusing attention on the collectivity of the singing. Between repetitions of the refrain Pastor Garry interspersed a number of improvised verses, one of which was an adaptation of the lyrics of the hymn “Father, I Stretch My Hand to Thee”:

I stretch my hands to you,
No other help I know,
If you withdraw your hand from me, God,
I got nowhere; I don’t know where to go.101


100 In the Hebrew Scriptures this term is used to denote the inner sanctuary of the Tabernacle where the Ark of the Covenant was stored. Contemporary black pentecostals have adopted it to refer to an overwhelming experiential state. This usage became especially common following Deitrick Haddon’s 1999 recording “We Worship You” (Chain Breaker, Tyscot Records), a song that has become a standard in many black pentecostal churches and includes the lyrics, “Into the holy of holies / That’s where I want to be.”

101 See hymn #127 in the African American Heritage Hymnal (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2001), where the lyrics are printed as, “Father, I stretch my hands to Thee; / No other help I know. / If Thou withdraw Thyself from me, / O! whither shall I go?”
The hymn’s texts, written by Charles Wesley in 1741, have long been sung in many African American congregations. Thus, even as Pastor Garry created something very new—a “spontaneously composed” song—he grounded it in religious and cultural history by interpolating the lyrics of this hymn.

But even beyond this borrowing from an old hymn text, the very act of creating a new religious song in the moment resonates with accounts of the creation of spirituals long forwarded by many composers and scholars of black religious music. In an introduction that accompanied the publication of some of his arranged spirituals during the years around 1920, composer HT Burleigh wrote that spirituals “were never ‘composed,’ but sprang into life, ready made, from the white heat of religious fervor …”102 More recently Jon Michael Spencer has postulated that some spirituals likely emerged when “extemporaneous sermonizing” “crescendoed” into “intoned utterance” and was joined by a “tonal response from the congregation” that “resulted in the burgeoning of song.”103 Though without recorded evidence it is impossible to know how spirituals actually came into being, this lineage of thought about their origins makes it easy to imagine that the process which resulted in extemporized song at Faith Assembly on January 9, 2011 was something like the process that gave birth to many musical utterances in the African American religious past.

After about six minutes of singing Pastor Garry dispensed with lyrics altogether and began to simply hum, leading the church in a long decrescendo. He then spoke quietly into the microphone, “Begin to worship, begin to worship, begin to worship, begin to worship,” and followed with, “Now. Just worship.” The musical texture reduced to only synthesized

102 See, for example, HT Burleigh, The Celebrated Negro Spirituals (New York: Ricordi, 1917-1924).

strings and high hat and Pastor Garry spoke softly. He mixed tongues-speech with declarations of thanksgiving and words of encouragement. This led to many quiet repetitions of “Thank you, God.”

Immediately following this last whispered “Thank you, God,” Pastor Garry shushed into the microphone. The musicians, already near silent, stopped playing completely. The shushing sound was a signal to listen. It was also the sound of breath, of the everlasting give and take of inspiration and expiration on which life depends. For believers it was a sound that potentially brought to the surface an awareness of their own primordial core in the sense that “God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.”

Pastor Garry expelled three long “shhhhhhhhhhhhs,” emptying his lungs of air entirely each time. A long moment passed and then he whispered “be still… be still… be still… be still… be still… be still… be still…”

There was a feeling of arrival. A long journey deeper and deeper “in,” through praise and through worship, was completed. For several minutes the only sounds in the atmosphere were the murmuring of tongues speech and prayers. Faith Assembly had reached its “Acts two moment.” An ancient narrative—one of the foundational stories for all pentecostal believers—was sonically reanimated in the present. Members at Faith Assembly say that encounters such as this one work to transform their immediate circumstances. They receive relief from, and revelation about, the cares and weights and issues that they brought with them into the service, even as they viscerally experience connection to the distant past. For

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104Genesis 2:7. My interpretation draws on a comment made by Bishop McKenzie during an altar call on 24 June 2012. Although the altar call at Faith Assembly is usually accompanied by music, on this Sunday as the band began to play McKenzie said sternly, “No. Stop the music. We ain’t going with no music today. See I’m convinced that sometimes we just need to listen to the breath of life that’s on the inside [of us].”
them, the moment is a display of the power of the Holy Ghost, and a direct experiencing of the timelessness of that power.

In one of Bishop McKenzie’s sermons about the Acts chapter two narrative, the pastor told his congregation,

Now we are looking at Acts and talking about Pentecost,  
But I’m trying to let you know how much it’s going-to-cost.  
Because it ain’t just about Pentecost, it’s about you.  
I’m translating this to you.  
You’re the ones that need it during the week.  
You need to know how He comes.  
So when He comes you won’t be shocked.105

To claim that what happened in the Bible is relevant to how believers live today is a common rhetorical move for black pentecostal pastors. What is especially significant about the events at Faith Assembly on January 9, 2011, however, is that they take this sentiment beyond the realm of idea. Worshiping together, believers felt and heard events narrated in the Bible, embodying a relationship with those events that transcended intellectual understanding. It was the type of holistic experience that feeds the Spirit-filled imagination; the kind of experience that strengthens their certainty in the transformative power of the Holy Spirit. Moving from contemporary gospel song, through historically and culturally affirmative improvised practices, to a music-less moment of collective Spirit-led speech, Faith Assembly journeyed beyond simple “knowing” to a place of “knowing that they know that they know.”

In the course of my work I am often led back to the most basic questions: “Why do Faith Assembly’s members go to church? Why is it that they return week after week and invest considerable amounts of time, energy, and money?” Of course there are no answers to these questions that apply equally to each churchgoer. Broadly, Faith Assembly (like any religious institution) plays the role of affirming belief, culture, and a sense of local

105 Bishop Leroy McKenzie, FACC, October 9, 2011.
community. Even as it performs these roles, however, it does something else. It provides a space for the transformation of time. Churchgoers come to church from an imperfect past, and when they leave they head toward an uncertain future. But at church they embrace the idea that their pasts can be erased and their futures can be more prosperous than they ever imagined. Singing songs that glitter with the fragile tinsel of newness, they proclaim the gospel of forward momentum. But they also come to church to be assured that there is something deeper; something that transcends time. And in the fullness of this presence there is no past and no future. Presence emerges only in the present. Making music, sounding and resounding as a congregation, believers at Faith Assembly journey to places where they can be on one accord, present together.

Conclusion

This chapter has been an attempt to listen closely to sounds of worship at Faith Assembly Christian Center. I have argued that these sounds provide a medium for the transmission and negotiation of a kind of knowledge that shapes these Christians’ most fundamental religious beliefs and experiences. Importantly, the moments I have chosen to listen to most carefully are those where believers affirmed that there was a “shift in the atmosphere,” or a “flowing of the anointing.” These moments are not scripted according to doctrine or dogma, but are temporal spaces where the congregation creates and navigates a sea of meanings.

But these meanings that emerge through sound are shifting, in flux, messy. In short, they resemble the experience of day-to-day life more closely than theory or doctrine. Given this nature—their imprecision and indefiniteness—these are the meanings most often ignored in broader conversations about Spirit-filled Christians.
For many African American pentecostals, New Year’s Eve is the biggest church celebration of the year. Though church gatherings are always an opportunity to worship and glorify God, New Year’s Eve services, unlike those for Christmas and Easter, are usually structured more like a concert or gospel program than a Sunday morning service. Faith Assembly has often hired nationally-known gospel artists to help them celebrate the occasion. In the weeks leading up to New Year’s Eve 2010, however, Bishop Leroy McKenzie announced that the church was going to have an “in house” event this year. This decision resulted in part from the fact that the effects of the 2008 financial crisis were still being deeply felt, especially in the African American community. But McKenzie strove to cast his decision in a positive light. “Everything we need is in the house,” he said ebulliently. “This church is full of people with awesome gifts. We’ve got to celebrate them.”

Excitement scintillated in the sanctuary as the New Year’s Eve service began. For three-and-a-half hours church members shared their “awesome gifts.” Mostly, they danced. By the time Pastor Mary McKenzie came forward to preach the Word around 11pm, 42 different church members had participated in choreographed dances—what churchgoers usually call “praise dances.” Faith Assembly has an average attendance of around 100. On this special occasion there might have been an additional 50 or so people there. Thus, a significant percentage of attendees were also dance participants. The dancers included males and females ranging in age from toddlers to social security recipients. Some dance groups

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1Bishop Leroy McKenzie, FACC, December 12, 2010.
were organized according to age and gender—“The Young Boys of FACC,” for example—while others were composed of biological family members—there were two mother/son combinations and one dance featuring a mother and her four children. About a third of the dancers performed in mime, wearing black clothing with white face paint and white gloves.

This New Year’s Eve service gives some idea of the ubiquity of praise dance at Faith Assembly. The 42 people who danced that night represented a majority of the dancers at the church, but there are about 20 others who dance at least occasionally. Every Sunday worship service includes at least one, sometimes two or more, praise dances. These dances are as central to Faith Assembly’s identity as a religious community as communion is for many Catholics.

Critically engaging with recent work in theology, anthropology, and ethnomusicology, this chapter uses choreographed dance as a particularly rich site for the investigation of embodied epistemology. My argument is that, within Faith Assembly’s particular cultural and religious boundaries, dance plays an especially significant role in negotiating the challenges of belief. Dancers do not simply express belief, but they use their bodies to explore the complexities of believing. As an activity based fundamentally in doing—as opposed to simply thinking or speaking—dance is uniquely suited for this kind of exploration.

The notion of knowledge as embodied, and therefore more holistic than merely intellectual knowledge, has been a common theme among scholars in the humanities in recent decades; many of them inspired by the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and/or the practice theory of Pierre Bourdieu. A few examples of this work on topics relevant to the current project include: Yvonne Daniel, Dancing Wisdom: Embodied Knowledge in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Yoruba, and Bahian Candomble (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005); Jennifer Glancy, Corporal Knowledge: Early Christian Bodies (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Tomie Hahn, Sensational Knowledge: Embodying Culture Through Japanese Dance (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2007); Cia Sautter, The Miriam Tradition: Teaching Embodied Torah (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010); and James K.A. Smith, Thinking in Tongues: Pentecostal Contributions to Christian Philosophy (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010). In a somewhat different, but related, vein, the work of several poststructural and feminist scholars has also treated the body as a central concept, perhaps best exemplified by Judith Butler, Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’ (New York: Routledge, 1993).
Anthropologist Michael Jackson writes that “body movements often make sense without being intentional in the linguistic sense: as communicating, codifying, symbolizing, signifying thoughts or things that lie outside or anterior to speech.” Jackson’s comment highlights one of the fundamental claims in the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty—one that has been reiterated by writers across many disciplines—that the body does not somehow enact beliefs that already exist in the mind; mind and body are inseparable agents of experiencing, knowing, and believing. Using words, we can share parts of this trifecta of experience, knowledge, and belief with others. But words are always limited. Particularly in the milieu of pentecostal worship, when churchgoers strive to communicate about matters extraordinary and ultimate, words always leave one wanting. Thus, believers turn toward music, gesture, glossolalia, and a sprawling constellation of non- and extra-linguistic practices. Choreographed dance at Faith Assembly concentrates and explicitly foregrounds these kinds of communication. By doing so it becomes a powerful site for the embodied negotiation of dialectics that characterize contemporary African American pentecostal worship.

This chapter presents three case studies, each focusing on a specific choreographed dance performed at Faith Assembly. At the heart of each of the following three case studies is some fundamental tension arising from the interpretive claims made by leaders at Faith Assembly that calls out for negotiation. The first focuses on the tension between free will and predestination, the second focuses on the tension between sacred and secular conceptions of material value (specifically as it arises in the context of the prosperity gospel), and the third focuses on the tension between the church’s theological imperative to excise negativity from

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their speech and their need to grapple with the terminal illness of their leader. In each case, non-verbalized, affective understandings are mobilized through dance as dancers help edify the community through embodied explorations of these tensions.

The moments like those explored in this chapter’s case studies are especially important for the community because choreographed dance uniquely allows a large and diverse portion of the church’s membership to present themselves authoritatively during the course of worship. Other than the MC and the preacher, the Praise Team are the only other non-dancers who are consistently in the spotlight, and that group is composed of the same four to eight women each week; women who are all over 35 and under 65-years-old. It is primarily dance, then, that allows churchgoers both young and old, male and female, to “speak” in front of the congregation.

In addition to showing how believers use dance to negotiate the challenges of belief, this chapter also aims to show praise dance’s significance as a means through which believers grapple with the influx of consumer culture and new technologies into the contemporary church. The rise of praise dance in African American pentecostal churches occurred simultaneously with an explosion in the influence of mass-mediated Christian worship/entertainment, especially televangelism and popular gospel music, in the 1980s and 1990s. Concurrently with other shifts in popular culture—particularly MTV and the rise of the music video—there was an increasingly prominent visual dimension to the various instantiations of Christian worship that believers regularly encountered, first through televised worship services and later through gospel music videos and television shows. Dance, I believe, became a means through which churchgoers could bring this visual element into their local services. At the same time, however, it became a site for critical engagement
with the ideas and doctrines presented in these commercialized forms of worship. Since most praise dances were choreographed to contemporary gospel recordings, dance became a means through which these songs could be reinterpreted and recast as not merely products of a mass-mediated industry but as expressions with local relevance.

**Historical and Methodological Background**

Embodiment in African American worship is an enormous topic of which scholars have only scratched the surface. A wide range of practices and emphases at Faith Assembly suggest just how central the body is to black pentecostalism: congregational gesture, laying on hands, hugging, anointing with oil, an emphasis on apparel, prevalence of the metaphor of “fire in my bones,” ecstatic dance, just to name a few. My focus is on an extremely small part of this—choreographed dance. In contrast to shouting—the highly improvisatory and ecstatic form of dance that has long been one of the defining practices of African American pentecostalism—choreographed dance is pre-planned and scheduled as part of a worship service program. It is, however, an essential part of worship at Faith Assembly and many contemporary pentecostal churches, and a little-studied phenomenon. Exploring choreographed dance in detail can give us a fuller and more nuanced picture of the significance of embodied worship for African American Spirit-filled Christians.

Most scholarship on dance in African American Christian worship has focused primarily on its qualities of resistance and ecstasy. This focus is connected to the fact that many practitioners value Spirit-filled dance precisely because of its overwhelming experiential qualities and the loss or displacement of normal subjectivity that occurs when dancers are overcome with the infilling of the Holy Ghost. Several scholars writing in the early to mid-20th century postulated that the ring shout practiced widely by slaves in the
American South maintained African retentions against the tide of Western assimilationist ideology. A number of scholars have explored African American Spirit-filled dance as a form of spirit possession, despite the fact that most black pentecostals use the term “possession” only when referring to satanic or demonic forces. Other scholars have utilized theories of social deprivation to claim that the seeking of ecstatic experience is fundamentally an escapist response to the hardships of lower class existence. Similarly, the prominent black theologian James Cone claimed in the early 1980s that ecstatic holy dancing, or shouting, was essentially a response to the oppression black people suffered at the hands of white people. He wrote that “The authentic dimension of black people’s shouting is found in the joy they experience when God’s Spirit visits their worship and stamps a new identity upon their persons, in contrast to their oppressed status in white society. This and this alone is what the shouting is about.” Many other scholars, mostly ethnographers, have also discussed shouting with an emphasis on ecstasy, transcendence, and self-surrender. These scholarly assessments of African American religious dance tend to


8See, for example, William T. Dargan, “Congregational Gospel Songs in a Black Holiness Church: A Musical and Textual Analysis,” PhD diss. (Wesleyan University, 1983); Timothy Nelson, *Every Time I Feel the Spirit:*
emphasize what is beyond believers’ control—actions determined by cultural retention, spiritual possession, or socioeconomic status—over what believers will for themselves. I have chosen to focus on choreographed dance—rather than more spontaneous or improvised forms of dance, like shouting—in the interest of presenting another side of the story.

Ecstatic dance’s centrality to African American pentecostalism is something that I have emphasized throughout this dissertation, and it is a fact that will intersect in important ways with my discussion of choreographed dance in this chapter. As Cheryl Sanders points out, even the shout, “the quintessential ecstatic expression in Sanctified worship,” has “characteristic steps, motions, rhythms, and syncopations.”9 In other words, a “culturally and aesthetically determined static structure sustains the expression of ecstasy in a definite, recognizable form.”10 So even though “much of the dancing in African American worship is best characterized as ecstatic,” this dancing already represents an intertwining of static and ecstatic elements. Given this, Sanders claims that the “carefully choreographed and rehearsed dances” performed in many Sanctified churches can be seen as a continuation of preexisting practices even if they are “more properly described as exemplary of the static form.”11

In this brief discussion Sanders touches on the importance of dance and the fascinating relationship between its spontaneous and choreographed expressions within African American pentecostal worship. She does not, however, take her analysis any further, nor does she give readers detailed accounts of specific choreographed dances. In the 17 years

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10Ibid.

11Ibid., 65.
since the publication of Sanders’ monograph, praise dance has flourished in African American churches. Working with the example of Faith Assembly, this chapter updates, builds upon, and expands Sanders’ important observations.\textsuperscript{12} It is primarily concerned with choreographed dance as it unfolds within the framework of the pentecostal worship service. I am interested in what dance \textit{does} in the course of worship. How does it shift and shape worship experience? How does it present, heighten, reinterpret, or complicate particular ideas that are prominent within the community? What is its liturgical and theological significance? I explore these questions through an examination of the tripartite relationship between dancer, congregation, and song that characterizes every choreographed dance at Faith Assembly.

This approach is undergirded by two main ideas forwarded by James K.A. Smith in his analysis of pentecostal worship: 1) his articulation of the centrality of embodiment and practice to pentecostal worship, and 2) his articulation of pentecostal hermeneutics.\textsuperscript{13}

Smith writes that “Pentecostalism is not first and foremost a doctrinal or intellectual tradition; it is an affective constellation of practices and embodied ‘rituals.’ In Wittgensteinian terms, we could say that pentecostal spirituality is ‘a form of life.’”\textsuperscript{14}

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\textsuperscript{12}The only other scholarly examination of African American Spirit-filled liturgical dance that I have encountered is Chapter 5, “‘We Do Our Dance in the Sanctuary:’ Collective Power in TransPentecostal Dance,” in Kimberleigh Jordan, “‘My Flesh Shall Live in Hope:’ Power and the Black Body Moving in Sacred Space,” PhD diss. (New York University, 2009), 185-240.
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\textsuperscript{13}While I use Smith’s ideas as a helpful critical frame it is important to note that ultimately my aims are different than his. As a theologian and educator at a Christian university he is interested in reforming the way that people worship and live their lives as Christian believers. My work makes no claims on how people \textit{should} act as worshipers and believers, but instead asks what we might learn by exploring how one Christian community negotiates the challenges of life and belief through worship.
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Elsewhere he claims that “pentecostal worship performs the faith.” Thus, for Smith, the essence of being a pentecostal is not adhering to any pre-scripted doctrine. Instead, it is a kind of being and knowing that emerges from embodied experience. In his discussion of pentecostalism’s “non-dualistic affirmation of embodiment and materiality” he writes,

Such an affirmation of embodiment is essential to the incarnational principle at the heart of Christian confession. The story that God tells us about who we are begins with God’s making us flesh, quickening the flesh of Adam as a material, embodied creature—and then saying it was “very good.” This affirmation of the goodness of embodiment finds a reaffirmation in the incarnation of God in Christ, the Word become flesh. And it finds its ultimate reaffirmation in the hope of the resurrection…Because the goodness of embodiment is consistently affirmed and reaffirmed in the narrative arc of Scripture, we ought to take seriously…those ways of being-in-the-world that are unique to embodied creatures: the world of the arts, for instance, which requires ears to hear, eyes to see, hands to touch, bodies to dance.

If we understand this affirmation to be at the heart of pentecostalism, then the performance of choreographed dance at Faith Assembly can be thought of as an intensified site for the expression of essential aspects of the community’s religion. Smith’s comments also help us to appreciate the extent to which dance and belief are inseparable at Faith Assembly.

The way this chapter engages with Smith’s articulation of pentecostal hermeneutics is a bit more complicated. Smith lauds the “hermeneutical courage” of pentecostalism, using the actions of the apostle Peter in the Acts chapter two narrative as his exemplar. When an overwhelming experiential shift overtook the first century Christians on the day of Pentecost there were competing interpretations of what was happening. The biblical narrative says that “they were all amazed, and were in doubt, saying one to another, What meaneth this? Others

\[^{15}\text{Smith, }\textit{Thinking in Tongues}, \text{31.}\]

\[^{16}\text{Ibid. }\text{60.}\]

\[^{17}\text{Ibid., }\text{22-31.}\]
mocking said, these men are full of new wine.”\(^\text{18}\) In the midst of the confusion and the charges of drunkenness, however, Peter stood up and declared that what was happening was in fact what had been foretold by the prophet Joel, namely that this was the pouring out of the Spirit “upon all flesh.”\(^\text{19}\) Thus, Smith claims, it was only Peter’s interpretation that allowed for any kind of consensus among believers; the very birth of pentecostalism required one forceful interpretation to be forwarded amid “a conflict of interpretations.”\(^\text{20}\)

To some extent, every pentecostal worship service presents a microcosm of this dynamic. As experience unfolds during worship, many various interpretations become possible.\(^\text{21}\) For a voice to ring out authoritatively above the others is essential for bringing the congregation together and shaping the flow of experience. At Faith Assembly, this voice is usually that of their Bishop or Pastor. Congregants recognize that their leaders have the “gift of discernment,” and “operate under the anointing,” and, therefore, present divinely-inspired interpretations. But, as Chapter 1 discussed, congregants also claim that and “ye need not that any man teach you” because “the same anointing teacheth you of all things.”\(^\text{22}\) Thus, each worshipper ostensibly has the power to make Peter-like interpretive claims. And in instances where the words of the Bishop or Pastor are contradictory—where they, for example, admonish believers in one message to “let go and let God,” and in another to “make it happen”—it seems that such an interpretive claim is necessary. The vast majority of


\(^{19}\) Joel 2:28.

\(^{20}\) Smith, Thinking in Tongues, 23.

\(^{21}\) Of course this is true of any worship service or any gathering of people in general, but it is especially pronounced among African American pentecostals because of their valuing of expressive heterogeneity and their emphasis on Spirit-led experience, complex and elusive by its very nature.

\(^{22}\) 1 John 2:27
congregants, however, do not have access to the pulpit. The authority to preach is the privileged domain of a very few, and even the singing is primarily done by the six to eight members of the Praise Team.\textsuperscript{23} The medium of dance, then, is significant in the extent to which it allows congregants’ “voices” to ring out during worship.

Hermeneutically, however, what believers express through dance is nothing like the declarative proposition made by the apostle Peter in the Book of Acts. It is better described as a medium for \textit{exploration} or \textit{negotiation} than a medium for interpretation. This is where Smith’s ideas come into tension with one another; he insists on Peter’s declaration as a fundamentally pentecostal kind of interpretation, while at the same time stressing that understanding, for pentecostal believers, does not exist solely in the domain of the propositional. Smith writes that “In the milieu of pentecostal worship…we see a panoply of embodied practices that ‘carry’ within them a tacit understanding…Implicit in these practices are not only ‘beliefs,’ but also an unarticulated, affective understanding.” Smith claims that “This is a knowledge…that is on a register prior to propositional articulation.”\textsuperscript{24} At Faith Assembly this kind of embodied knowledge rises to the surface through choreographed dance as a means through which congregants explore and negotiate the declarative interpretive claims made by their leaders. Put differently, once “Peter” has spoken, many questions remain; the pragmatic implications of the interpretive propositions must be explored. Dance, as a practice of embodied \textit{doing}, rather than verbal discourse is uniquely suited for such exploration. Smith himself highlights the significance of the pragmatic dimensions of pentecostal worship practice when, in his discussion of speaking in tongues, he claims, “The

\textsuperscript{23}See Figure 1.1 in Chapter 1 for an outline of Faith Assembly’s clerical hierarchy. It’s important to note that even the Ministers who have earned their title in part because of the community’s recognition of their ability to preach, can only do so when it has been approved by the Bishop or Pastor.

\textsuperscript{24}Smith, \textit{Thinking in Tongues}, 27.
question we should ask is not, ‘What does this prayer mean?’ but rather, ‘What does this prayer do?’”\textsuperscript{25} The case studies in this chapter focus on choreographed dances performed at Faith Assembly and ask “What do these dances do?”\textsuperscript{26}

**CASE STUDY 1: Miming “Yes” and Making Choices as one of the Chosen**

At Faith Assembly, where congregants are repeatedly instructed to “let go and let God” and, with equal fervor, to “make it happen,” the problem of free will is an unmistakable presence. On the one hand, Faith Assembly’s leaders claim that, at least on a cosmological level, free will does not exist. God is omnipotent, they say, and there is no human action that is not part of His master plan. They back their claim with scriptures, noting that He “knew thee” before He “formed thee in the belly;” that He knows the “number of the very hairs on your head;” that believers are “predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will;” and, ultimately, that “all things work together for good to them that love God.”\textsuperscript{27}

But on the other hand, Bishop and Pastor McKenzie consistently stress personal responsibility as well as the individual’s capacity to change and to enact change. Pastor McKenzie said in one message, for example, “God is not going to do it for you, He left instructions for you…He left provision, He left instructions, but you got to get up…It’s all

\textsuperscript{25}Ibid., 144.

\textsuperscript{26}One final note on method: I am not a dancer. At an earlier stage of this project I had hoped to work up to dancing in front of the church as a way to achieve a more intimate level of embodied knowledge. But I eventually accepted that I had neither the courage nor the skill to attempt such a public display. Using video recordings made by Faith Assembly’s audio-visual department I often danced along to previously performed dances in the privacy of my home or office. This helped me to better understand the feeling of particular gestures and the corporeal rhythm of characteristic movements. It also made me viscerally aware of the skill that is required to perform in church, and my own ineptitude. The point is that my analyses of dance, unlike some of my analyses of music making in the last chapter, come from the perspective of an observer rather than a participant.

\textsuperscript{27}Jeremiah 1:5; Luke 12:7; Ephesians 1:11; and Romans 8:28. Each of these ranks among the most commonly cited scriptures at Faith Assembly.
dependent on you.”28 Even with regards to worship, Faith Assembly’s leaders emphasize the essentiality of personal initiative. Pastor Garry Mitchell, acting as MC during praise and worship one Sunday exhorted the congregation, “Because you’re here in the sanctuary, it is your responsibility to help usher in the presence! We’re going to move into the presence of God and it is your duty, it’s your job to make it happen!”29 Furthermore, the McKenzies often suggest that the unsaved person or the “backslidden” saint may operate “outside of His will.” For example, Pastor Mary McKenzie preached in October of 2011 that, “If you’re operating in the flesh, one thing God can’t do is come against your will. Some of ya’ll could’ve already been healed [dramatic pause] but your flesh…The power of God is available; if God delivered me, God can deliver you. But you got to want deliverance. But your flesh [will prevent it from coming].”30

Pastor McKenzie implies that God grants just enough free will to “test” a person; to determine the strength of her commitment, and to see whether she will choose to operate in “spirit” or in “flesh.”

Ultimately, the preached messages at Faith Assembly offer no simple resolution to the tension that inevitably arises between the belief that God has already preordained one’s destiny and the inescapable feeling that one must consciously and deliberately make choices and take actions that lead toward that destiny. As with many other apparently unresolvable tensions, the McKenzies stress the need for the believer to use prayer, fasting, scripture

29 Pastor Garry Mitchell, FACC, February 20, 2011.
30 Pastor Mary McKenzie, FACC, October 9, 2011.
reading, and other religious techniques to cultivate “discernment,” so that he or she will know whether to “wait on the Lord” or to “go get it.”

While a verbal prescription for discernment addresses the tension in one kind of way, a danced exploration of how life unfolds amid this tension addresses it with a different level of nuance. On December 6, 2009, a young man performed a dance at Faith Assembly which presented a kind of embodied narrative in dialogue with a contemporary gospel recording. Through an analysis of this dance, I will show how embodied practice functions as a particularly effective means through which worshipers can productively explore the tension between predestination and free will.

December 6, 2009

On this cold Sunday morning, there were many empty seats in Faith Assembly’s sanctuary. Bishop and Pastor McKenzie were on a Caribbean cruise; a trip that, for at least a full year, they had been encouraging members of the congregation to join them on. A dozen or so members went along. Information about travel arrangements, costs, deadlines for payment plans, and so on had been part of the church announcements nearly every week for several months. It was an exciting time for the travelers. But, despite small attendance, there was excitement in the sanctuary that morning as well. Bishop McKenzie had arranged for his “spiritual son,” Bishop Dwight Butler—a former member of Faith Assembly who went on to start his own church in western Virginia—to “bring the Word,” and for Minister Stephanie Lesane to make her debut as master of ceremonies (MC) for the service. Congregants seemed determined to lend the extra energy that may be needed to “stir the atmosphere” in the absence of their usual preacher and MC.

31These quotes are from recent popular gospel songs that have been used for choreographed dances at Faith Assembly. “They That Wait,” Fred Hammond, Love Unstoppable, Jive/Verity, 2009; and “Go Get It,” Mary Mary, Go Get It, Columbia, 2012.
Because the leaders of the dance ministry were on the trip, Minister Stephanie had asked her son, William Coleman, who was not a regular attendee of the church, to dance during praise and worship. Coleman, who often performs as part of a duo called Anointed Xpressions, is a highly skilled dancer whose chosen medium is mime, a phenomenon that has swept the African American pentecostal church in the last two decades. Mime dancers paint their faces white and usually wear dark clothing and white gloves. Compared to non-mime liturgical dance, their choreography is generally less concerned with continuity of movement than with wordlessly “speaking” out or acting out the song to which they dance. Though it is a relatively recent phenomenon, and has faced its share of detractors, mime fits comfortably within a constellation of pentecostal worship practices—including glossolalia, chanted preaching, and physical gestures—that signify before and beyond linear language.

On this Sunday, Coleman was wearing not only face paint and white gloves, but a navy blue Adidas track suit with three white stripes running down the length of the sleeves and pant legs, imparting a mime-like expressiveness to the movements of his limbs as well as those of his face and hands. Coleman’s dance was choreographed to a recording called “Yes” by a Chicago-area group known as Shekinah Glory Ministry. Since their 2002 breakout hit “Praise is What I Do,” the group has been enormously popular among a broad swath of the African American church community. They are distinguished by their fiercely-independent

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32 Though the authoritative history of mime in the African American church is yet to be written, there is general consensus that the practice’s most important pioneers were two brothers, Keith and Karl Edmonds, from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania who call themselves K&K Mime. They came to prominence in the early 1990s, and received exposure from some of the major players in the gospel music industry including Kirk Franklin and the eponymous host of Black Entertainment Television’s Bobby Jones Gospel. Although mime has proliferated in the last twenty years, the influence of K&K Mime remains pervasive, partly evident in the large number of male duos—such as Anointed Xpressions—that practice the form.


approach to recording, production, and marketing; and their recordings—always live—do not adhere to the norms of gospel music radio, but often stretch out over 10 minutes and include preaching-like spoken interludes, improvised exhortations, and extended reprises. “Yes” is 14 minutes long. Its lyrics consist of a repeated four-line verse, dozens of melismatic repetitions of the word “yes,” and copious improvisatory vocalizing—what churchgoers call “ad-libbing”—carried out by the female lead singer. The first section features this lead singing a mostly stepwise minor-key melody to relatively sparse piano accompaniment. After about three and a half minutes the choir enters in the relative major singing the “yes” melismas. Over the next three minutes the song builds to a big climax and then drops sharply, returning to the relative minor and a texture of solo voice and piano. This initiates a long semi-improvisatory section that includes spoken exhortation and full-textured reprises of both the minor and major key sections of the song.

The Dance

Coleman begins his dance seated at the front of the sanctuary, facing the congregation. As the recording starts to play, he puffs casually on a fake marijuana cigarette and takes an occasional sip from a 40oz bottle in a brown paper bag, apparently unaware, or completely indifferent, to the music “in the atmosphere.” Gradually, his movements suggest an awareness of something—some presence or sound. At the lyric, “Will your spirit still say ‘yes’?” Coleman grabs at his stomach as if his body is being invaded by an outside force. For the next two minutes or so, he continues sitting and gesturing occasional moments of spiritual sentience.

Then, in an act that is seemingly beyond his control, Coleman rises in perfect sync with the entrance of the choir on the recording. His steps are wobbly and unsure. Perhaps the
beer and weed have compromised his motor skills, or maybe, his motions suggest, there is some deeper instability in the fact that he did not consciously choose to take these steps. Coleman stumbles about and confusedly scrunches his face and scratches the back of his head. He puffs the joint again, partially regains composure, and moves as if trying to get away from whatever this is. But as the lead singer ad-libs the line “I’ll obey, Jesus,” the joint and the 40oz. slip out of Coleman’s fingers and fall to the ground. He slowly shakes his head and throws his hands out dismissively. Again he attempts to walk away. But something grabs him. In big sweeping movements his body swivels to one side and then the other, traveling several feet backwards each time. Coleman’s head remains motionless; his eyes are fixed intently on the direction opposite the one he is moving. After four giant swivels he is front and center in the sanctuary, his back to the congregation. With outstretched arms he slowly spins 180 degrees to face the congregation. His hands brush briskly over his head at the repeated lyric, “I’ve made up in my mind, I’ve made up in my mind.” And then, bending his knees and compactly bringing his body in toward a central point, like drawing back a sling shot, he embodies the tension of the recording at the point just before the full instrumental ensemble enters. Coleman’s hands rise to his mouth and explode forth cathartically as the lead singer screams “I’ll say…” an instant before the cymbals crash on the downbeat and the choir completes her phrase with their harmonically resolving “yes.” “Speaking” with the recording, the dancer has chosen, it seems, to utter his first “yes.”

Gradually, Coleman gets more synchronized with the recording and begins to lip sync and mime the song’s lyrics. Sometimes Coleman’s movements seem voluntary, sometimes not. This push and pull imparts a slight gestural awkwardness which continues for several minutes until, concurrently with the dropout of all the instruments except piano, Coleman
falls to the floor. His body collapses and jerks in time with the rapid-fire repetitions of the lead singer,

…ye-ay, ye-ay, ye-ay, ye-ay, yeahyeahyeahyeahyeahyeahyeahyeah, Jesus!

The majority of Faith Assembly’s congregants rise to their feet, clapping, some of them shaking their heads in awe. Coleman’s gestures mime the intense physicality of total surrender, an experience many of them know well from their own encounters with the Spirit.

From this point forward, Coleman moves with a new sense of authority. When the lead singer transitions from singing to a preaching-style spoken delivery, the dancer gesturally embraces the role of “preacher.” Miming this role in front of Faith Assembly’s congregation, he has radically transformed from a sinner into a preacher in the course of the dance.

Then, in a final act of transformation some 13 minutes in, Coleman removes his “earthly clothes” to reveal that, beneath his Adidas track suit, he has been wearing the burgundy silk robe of a Bishop all along. His gestures become completely confident. Having been remade by a long process of being controlled and taking control, he throws his arms open, bows his head, and presents his body—adorned in its “true” clothing—as a site of both submission and power. He holds this position for an incredibly long 30 seconds. As the recording ends, Faith Assembly’s church band picks up the music from the closing vamp of the song as the congregation claps and cheers wildly. Coleman, seemingly shifting from his dance persona to his “real” self, brings his hands together in a praying posture and raises his face toward the sky, as if to direct the congregation’s approval toward the true choreographer of his dance.
William Coleman’s dance dramatized the perennial tension between free-will and predestination. What he presented the church was not an intellectual or rationalistic “solution,” but an exploratory narrative about how such a tension may shape the unfolding of one’s life. The fact that the recording to which he danced was 14 minutes long aided this endeavor tremendously, allowing a gradual temporal development that passed through many stages marked by Coleman’s miming of varying intensities of acting and being acted upon.

When Coleman began the dance—ingesting drugs and alcohol, seemingly unaware of any “higher calling”—his movements suggested his confidence that he was freely choosing these actions. But then, grabbed by some external power, this confidence was fundamentally shaken. He seemed forced into actions that he did not choose. When he eventually uttered “yes,” however, he centered himself in a gesture of inner resolve, and mimed the utterance with force and control. Several members at Faith Assembly have testimonies about being “delivered” from substance abuse, and Coleman’s mimed narrative was consonant with these stories. One member told me that God had “pulled her out” of her “dark place,” but that, ultimately, she had to choose to make a commitment to “staying out.” Even if the details of Coleman’s dance connected it explicitly to such stories of substance abuse, it resonates more broadly as well. I’ve heard many testimonies at Faith Assembly of personal transformations where experiences of both making significant choices and “being chosen” figure prominently. Coleman’s dance showed the way that both kinds of experience shape people’s lives over time. He showed this with a physical immediacy and emotional nuance that would be virtually impossible to express with language alone. Of course, Coleman’s dance featured a “happy ending” that fit with the cultural and religious expectations of the community. He was wearing the silk Bishop’s robe throughout the dance; his identity was predetermined. But
along the preordained path to destiny, his experience appeared often to be that of exerting free will.

Technically, according their leaders, Faith Assembly believes that God has predestined everything. But believing this does not mean that worshipers do not embrace free will as a pragmatically useful concept. Bishop McKenzie never tired of telling his congregation that “God takes the foolish things to confound the wise.” As an example, he frequently added, “He’s got a drunk sleeping up under a bridge right now. And He’s just waiting for due season to call him forth to be a great man of God.”35 This is, in fact, one of the central messages at Faith Assembly: that one’s life can be radically transformed.

Believers say that this transformation is always Spirit-led, but its manifestation depends on one’s choosing—or at least having the experience that one is choosing—to act in new ways. Underlying this emphasis on transformation is the suggestion that, in the crucible of lived reality, the question of whether or not one is simply carrying out a preordained script matters less than the knowledge that transformation is possible; that the one sitting around drinking and smoking joints can become a Bishop, or that the one under the bridge can become a “great man of God.” The process by which these changes occur, however, is marked by complex experiences of acting and being acted upon. A dance like Coleman’s confirms the community’s belief in the possibility of radical transformation, but it simultaneously shows the complex experiences that mark such a process. And that kind of showing is something that dance is uniquely suited to do.

35 This quote is from September 18, 2011. McKenzie, however, frequently invoked this hypothetical under-the-bridge dweller.
CASE STUDY 2: Dancing around Doctrines of Prosperity

Philosophers, artists, and various thinkers who have considered the human condition have long commented on the apparent universality of existential dissatisfaction. Despite our personal, social, spiritual, or material gains we remain “haunted by a sense of insufficiency and loss.” As Michael Jackson puts it, our search for well-being always takes place in a “world of want.” Throughout history this inescapable state of affairs has been at the heart of most forms of religious belief and practice. In the attempt to gain what they do not have, quell their desire for more, or do both, people across the ages have turned toward various kinds of spiritual or non-human forces for help. Doctrines of prosperity—which have long been part of the American religious landscape but have become especially visible in African American churches in the last three decades—drill into the bone marrow of this existential dissatisfaction. Those who preach this message claim that the very reason we feel a desire for more is because God desires more for us—more money, more happiness, better health, and so on. It is written in Psalms, they point out, that God “hath pleasure in the prosperity of his servant,” and in 3 John that He wishes “above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth.” Prosperity preachers teach that if believers do their part—praying, studying scripture, attending church, giving tithes and offerings, and so on—God will not only give them the more that they desire, but He will delight in doing so.

As Chapter 1 discussed, doctrines of prosperity exert a strong influence at Faith Assembly. In general, church members embrace the idea that God wants them to have a good

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37 I borrow this from the title of Jackson’s book.

38 Psalms 35:27. The letter that constitutes 3 John begins, “The elder unto the well beloved Gaius, whom I love in the truth. Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth.” Most prosperity preachers read this greeting as a direct communication from God to His people.
life—not just a good afterlife, but a good life in the here-and-now—and that He has given them the means to make this a reality (especially the practices of fasting, praying, sacrificing time and money, and speaking “the same words about themselves that God has spoken about them in the Bible.”)

But notions of the good life are as diverse at Faith Assembly as one might expect among any group of 150 people. In my years at the church I have spoken to many members about prosperity. Some emphasize the financial implications of the concept while others explicitly downplay finances, focusing instead on physical health, relationships, or general level of happiness. Everyone seems to agree, however, that God is deeply concerned with the material conditions of His people. A common catchphrase at Faith Assembly—and one that Bishop McKenzie and Pastor Garry have often exhorted churchgoers to chant in call and response fashion—is, “We’re on our way to our wealthy place!” On October 2, 2011, Pastor Mary McKenzie elaborated on this phrase in her preached message,

We’re on our way,
To our wealthy place.
We’re on our way.
Wealth just don’t mean money,
Wealth means happiness,
Wealth means peace,
Wealth means contentment,
Being wealthy in God,
Just being happy with who you are,
That’s a wealthy place.
When you wake up in the morning, and you like yourself,
That’s wealth.
When you go out and speak to your friend,
That’s wealth.
When you go out and have a purpose and a vision,
Well, that’s wealth.
God wants to get you to your wealthy place this morning.

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McKenzie’s words present wealth as a general sense of having the upper hand in the struggle against existential dissatisfaction. Being wealthy is as much a matter of experience—and interpretation of experience—as it is a matter of any measurable scale such as income or the monetary value of possessions. Being prosperous, McKenzie suggests, is about cultivating a life that embodies Philippians 4:11: “…for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content.” Importantly, this is not a renunciation of the desire for more. During my tenure at Faith Assembly the McKenzies have always claimed that God has promised to bless believers materially as well as spiritually, and to do so “exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think.” Their teaching about prosperity certainly does not exclude money and the things that money buys, it only emphasizes that believers can be prosperous even as they wait expectantly for material manifestations of that prosperity.

But if they are to fully accept that abundance is available—both in experiential and material form—then believers must negotiate this with the appearance of scarcity. While Pastor McKenzie teaches that the holistic prosperity in which she believes is available to all of God’s people, church members still must face the “natural” reality that there are sharp disparities in financial wealth even among their own local community, not to mention the enormous inequalities in their city, nation, and the world at large. Moreover, while some churchgoers appear adept at finding contentment in “whatsoever state,” others simply do not. Believing in prosperity is a constant challenge. “The devil,” Pastor McKenzie says,

keeps telling you because you ain’t this or you ain’t that, or you weren’t born in a certain family, you can’t have these things [that God has promised]… Why do we listen to the devil when we know what God has said? And we know what God has done in our lives. Yet we listen to the devil. We are adamant about being depressed. We are adamant about being unhappy! We are adamant.\footnote{Ephesians 3:20.}
In this dynamic where churchgoers fervently embrace the notion of God’s promised prosperity yet do not always see explicit material manifestations of it, dance plays a crucial role. Dance provides believers the chance to embody experiences of material well-being; not to merely act prosperous, but to be prosperous in the holistic sense that Pastor McKenzie espouses.

To illustrate my argument I could have chosen any of a number of dances. I have, however, decided to focus on one performed by Sister Rhachel Royal-Fortune and her son, Christian, for three reasons: 1) its prominent position during the course of a New Year’s Eve worship service (always a significant event for Faith Assembly), 2) the fact that Sister Rhachel is one of the directors of and primary creative agents in Faith Assembly’s dance ministry, and 3) the fact that she also performs in church as a spoken word poet which creates the opportunity to compare the messages she proclaims across mediums.

“Expect the Great”: December 31, 2010

The beginning of this chapter discussed New Year’s Eve as Faith Assembly’s biggest holiday of the year. New Year’s Eve services celebrate renewal, rejuvenation, rebirth, second chances—values of highest significance for born-again Christians. These celebrations are also part of a long tradition of so-called “watch night” services in black communities; services held in part to commemorate New Year’s Eve, 1862, the night enslaved people eagerly awaited Abraham Lincoln’s signature of the Emancipation Proclamation to be carried out the following day. As 2010 fades into 2011, Faith Assembly’s sense of expectation may not be quite so revolutionary, but the church is packed and sizzling with electric excitement.

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41Pastor Mary McKenzie, FACC, February 24, 2013.
Forty different churchgoers have come forth as individuals or in groups to dance before the congregation. The MC for the evening announces that there will be one final dance before Pastor McKenzie comes to “preach us into the New Year.” This is an important dance. The acts of worship that immediately precede the Word are charged with the heavy responsibility of ensuring that the atmosphere is set so that an anointed Word can flow freely.

Sister Rhachel Royal-Fortune and her eleven-year-old son Christian stand before the congregation in silence. As loud recorded music starts to play, they begin moving enthusiastically and lip syncing along. The song is “Expect the Great,” by Jonathan Nelson. Its lyrics proclaim a message of prosperity for a new year. Here are the first two verses:

This is just the beginning
The year of refreshing
His plan now unfolding
The time of your great blessing

Expect nothing but victory
That’s the promise of our King
To do exceedingly, abundantly
Above what you ask or think

Shoeless (as is common for praise dancers) and dressed in black and white for the festive occasion, the mother and son duo exudes excitement as they dance out the song’s lyrics in a sign-language-like fashion. At the chorus—it’s only lyrics are “expect the great”—the dancers bounce exuberantly. Joyful expressions splash across Sister Rhachel’s face so intensely that they almost look tinged with anger. Christian’s face is focused, calm, confident, and sincere, occasionally approaching, but never cracking, a smile. At the word


“expect,” they both hold their arms out in a gesture of invitation. Then on “the great” Rhachel flings her arms upwards and outwards suggesting a celebration of an open magnitude of external greatness while Christian balls his hands into fists, holds them close to his body, and slides his chest forward, suggesting stability, power, and internal greatness. Together, mother and son’s motions seem to proclaim a greatness—an abundance—that is both within and without, both immanent and transcendent. Back and forth they bounce, Rhachel passing behind Christian as they switch sides, covering every inch of the stage.

Then, at the song’s bridge, they stand shoulder to shoulder in the center of the stage directly facing the congregation. Their choreography to the bridge unfolds in four segments each corresponding to a melodic phrase. They perform moonwalk-like movements to the first phrase on the lyric “anticipate.” As their right feet slide back the dancers push their right palms forward, then the same with the left. As they “anticipate,” Rhachel and Christian remain in one place, moving neither forward nor backward. Yet, in anticipation their bodies flow smoothly; stationary, yes, but simultaneously joyful and filled with life.

Then, for the second melodic phrase, with the lyrics “faith activate,” Rhachel and Christian each put their palms together just below their chin as if praying. Smoothly, they shift their weight and slide one hand back and the other forward, morphing from a praying posture to a ninja stance.
“Prayed up” and filled with faith, the dancers are ready to attack—to attack the devil and the feeling of lack he brings—and seize their moment. They quickly break from this posture and point both hands toward the congregation as the voices on the recording sing “this is your year.” On “year” both mother and son reach toward the sky and then spread their arms wide, gesturing overwhelming abundance. For the final phrase of the bridge, with the lyrics “your moment is here,” both dancers point toward the ground and then Rhachel flings her arms high above her head while Christian remains in his gesture of groundedness. The moment of prosperity is here, Rhachel signifies, in the spiritual abundance of the atmosphere, and here, Christian suggests, right where our feet are on the ground.

The song ends with several minutes of a closing vamp centered on the dominant in which the singers repeat the lyrics, “the blessing is on you.” The dancers descend from the stage and dance in the area immediately in front of the first row of the congregation. They are again bouncing and covering considerable ground, moving from one end of the church to the other. At the word “blessing,” Christian sometimes rolls his arms quickly, or sometimes slides his fingers over his head (signifying “anointing”) and then points to the congregation for “is on you.” His mother follows behind him and seems to dance directly to him. She leans

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44 “Prayed up” is a common phrase among Spirit-filled Christians. It is also the title of a popular song by Karen Clark-Sheard released in 2010 that was danced to at Faith Assembly several times.
in and sticks her face inches away from her son’s; she points at him in what seem to be scolding or admonishing gestures; she forcefully invades his space. It is as if she is disciplining him. The joyful expressions are gone from her face. She looks deadly serious. “You have to fight for this blessing,” she seems to be saying to her son, echoing a sentiment that has been repeated over and over again by Bishop and Pastor McKenzie. Christian dances more intensely in response to his mother’s movements, but his face never looks troubled.

The dancers’ choreography creates, or possibly reveals, a layer of meaning that is not immediately apparent in listening to the recording. Having the blessing “on you” is not, their movements suggest, all about pleasure and celebration; living a prosperous life requires the kind of discipline gestured by Rhachel and the kind of committed obedience and focus gestured by Christian. They conclude their dance by turning their attention and their pointing hands toward the congregation for one final “the blessing is on you.” The church band picks up the vamp from the recording and Pastor McKenzie steps to the lectern, boldly speaking into her microphone, “If you believe that, you better give God a shout on tonight! I’ve come tonight to declare that the blessing of the Lord is upon your life!”

James K.A. Smith writes that “embedded in every liturgy [that is, worship practice] is an implicit worldview or ‘understanding’ of the world.” Following Smith, we might ask what is the “‘understanding’ of the world” performed in a dance like Rhachel and Christian’s? On a basic level, one might claim that their dance is nothing more than an

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45 For example, on March 11, 2011 Pastor McKenzie preached, “You gotta fight to keep your family! You gotta fight to keep your mate! You gotta fight to keep your house in order! You gotta fight to keep your mind regulated!... This is warfare! Come on, fight for your family, fight for your growth! Fight! Fight in Jesus’ name!”

amplification of the song’s lyrics; a simplistic presentation of the prosperity message:
“expect nothing but victory… the blessing is on you.”

But what are their bodies saying as they dance? Rhachel and Christian seem to be expressing an “understanding’ of the world” that celebrates the goodness of material creation as proclaimed by God in the book of Genesis when He formed human bodies and said that “it was good.” This is a prosperity message. It’s a religious celebration of what we might think of as a kind of materialism; the materialism of being an embodied creature. Dance is an opportunity for the dancer to experience “material” well-being in-the-moment. And in the case of Rhachel and Christian, dance is an embodied display of familial connection and love, and a public proclamation of that love.

To dance for the creator, Pastor Mary McKenzie said in a sermon, quoting Nehemiah 8:10, is to know “the joy of the Lord, which is your strength!” Moving before the congregation, dancers kindle joy, release endorphins, and feel power in movement. They free themselves from the constraints of everyday life and open themselves to a heightened engagement with existence. Dancers like Rhachel and Christian are incredibly skilled, and for worshipers at the church, their gifts and talents testify to the splendor of material creation.

Glenn Hinson relates a story of interviewing a church elder who was touched by the Holy Spirit in the middle of their conversation. Hinson says,

He didn’t “suspect” that the Spirit was at hand; he didn’t just “sense” a presence other than our own. He knew it, beyond a shadow of a doubt. Because he felt it… Not in a way that was shaped by belief, but in a way that gave belief its very shape.49


48 Pastor Mary McKenzie, 10 April 2011

49 Hinson, Fire in My Bones, 7 (emphasis in original).
Extrapolating from Hinson’s ideas, we might consider the possibility that the doctrines of prosperity gospel resonate within a community such as Faith Assembly because they align with believers’ experience of abundance. In other words, the belief that God wishes material blessings for His people is built on the foundation of an embodied familiarity with the abundance of creation. James K.A. Smith concedes this possibility when he writes that “the prosperity gospel (for all its failures)...is evidence of a core affirmation that God cares about our bellies and bodies.”

The idea that “God cares about our bellies and bodies” has an important cultural dimension at Faith Assembly as well, particularly in the context of a Watch Night service. This notion of prosperity is an affirmation that God cares about black bodies; bodies that were once bought and sold, bodies that were once whipped and beaten, bodies that once hung from trees throughout the South. But, now, as they dance before Faith Assembly’s congregation, black bodies present themselves as testaments to the powers of a liberating creator. They enact a multifaceted vision of “prosperity” that includes the “wealth” of cultural heritage. This became clear to me during a worship service in February 2011, about two months after this New Year’s Eve celebration.

A group of young men came before the church and performed a dance to a recording called “God Favored Me,” a recent hit for gospel superstar Hezekiah Walker. The entire congregation rose to their feet as the young men energetically dramatized the lyrics of the song’s climactic call and response section:

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51A similar point is made by minister and performance studies scholar Kimberleigh Jordan who writes that, “In the case of transPentecostal liturgical dance much of the power derives precisely from the fact that it bears no trace of the master/slave relationship that is inscribed on so much that is American religion and American culture.” Jordan, “‘My Flesh Shall Live in Hope,’” 239.
They whispered, conspired, they told their lies  
My character, my integrity, my faith in God  
Will not fall, will not bend, won’t compromise  
I speak life, and prosperity, and I speak health  
(God favored me!)  
(He favored me!)  
(God favored me!)  
(God favored me!)  

This song appears to encapsulate the invidious individualism often noted by critics of the prosperity message. But shortly after this dance, Sister Rhachel came forward and began to recite a spoken word poem she had composed in honor of Black History Month. It cast the message of the previous song in a different light. Here is an excerpt:

…we have made it out  
Have no doubt  
You are His prized possession  
His prized people  
We are finally equal whether they tell you you are or not  
You gotta believe in what you got  
You were once bought so please don’t sell out  
We are the ones once tarred and feather  
Gathered on ships and transported together  
Brought to a land to slave and die  
Yet against all odds we must defy the stigma attached to being black  
This talented, this gifted  
This strong, and this uplifted  
This never held down  
This fight tooth and nail to the ground  
This black is mines  
And no one can take it  
Come on my people  
I think we going to make it  
Gonna [sings] “Lift every voice and sing  
‘Til earth and heaven ring  
Ring with the harmonies  
Of liberty.  
Let our rejoicing rise  
High as the listening skies  
Let it resound  
Loud as the rolling sea.”  

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53Sister Rhachel, 20 February 2011
In the booming applause for Sister Rhachel’s performance of her poem, it seemed that she had reinterpreted the preceding dance to “God Favored Me.” All of the sudden, “life, health, and prosperity” did not sound like the buzzwords of an individualistic doctrine, but, instead, like the elemental powers that had brought black people this far and would allow them to continue the struggle into the future. To claim that this is what Hezekiah Walker had in mind when he originally penned “God Favored Me,” would be pushing this line of reasoning too far, but in this moment, in this local space, his message was reimagined. The abundance dramatized by the bodies of the dancers became an abundance of cultural heritage and a display of Godly love for black bodies. Sister Rhachel’s poem celebrated this kind of abundance, and exhorted her fellow churchgoers to revel in it. But she cautioned her community to be careful, because the world’s ideas of material value are often warped and grotesque. “You once were bought” she reminded them, “so please don’t sell out.”

Throughout this dissertation I have referenced the tension between the politically progressive and the theologically conservative strains of black Christianity. But though scholars have often pointed out the irreconcilable differences of the two sides, the groups also share fundamental affirmations. Whether it manifests as a focus on personal attainment or improving conditions for the poor, I believe that it is worth considering the possibility that at the root of the guiding ideologies of both camps is an experience of God that provides evidence that He cares about people as embodied creatures. For both groups God is, at some foundational level, a God of material well-being.

When they are dancing, believers at Faith Assembly don’t fit comfortably into either of these ideologically opposed camps. Instead, they magnify the shared affirmation of material well-being that underlies these ideologies. Through their embodied worship, they
actively negotiate their own version of a gospel of prosperity. With minds and bodies engaged, they forge on through life’s rhythms of feasting and fasting, continually clarifying and seeking their own vision of well-being.

CASE STUDY 3: Speaking the Unspeakable Through Dance

“It was very hard for me to accept what [Bishop McKenzie] was going through because I knew that he would not survive,” Pastor Mary McKenzie’s sister told the assembled congregation at Faith Assembly three days after Bishop Leroy McKenzie had passed away on October 11, 2012. “You cannot survive stage-four cancer,” she said emphatically, “You cannot be cured of stage-four cancer.” The pastor’s sister is a physician’s assistant who has worked with cancer patients for much of her career. She was speaking on a Sunday evening to attendees at what had originally been announced as the “Expect a Miracle Service,” but was now being called the “Expect a Miracle Cancer Awareness Program.”

It had only been about a month since Bishop McKenzie had announced to the church that he had been diagnosed with cancer. He had been losing weight for several months, and by the time of his diagnosis his physical decline was striking. McKenzie had always been a large man, but by the fall of 2012 he weighed about half of what he did when I first met him in 2002. When he reported the news to the congregation, he said that the doctors told him he was too far gone for treatment, all they could do was help him be “comfortable.” Musterings as much energy as he could, McKenzie held the microphone close to his mouth and retorted, “I don’t want to be comfortable! I’ve never done anything to be comfortable in my life!” The congregation cheered loudly. “I’m standing on the Word of God,” McKenzie said, “and I’m going to believe everything that He’s told me.” Pastor Mary McKenzie announced several
scriptures that the church community was going to “stand on,” including Psalm 118:17: “I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the Lord.”

During the next few weeks, there was much talk of healing and miracles at Faith Assembly. Pastor Mary McKenzie preached about imploring God with “bold faith” and repeated her own testimony about how God had—through the miracles of medical technology—healed her from breast cancer. But as Bishop McKenzie—weak, unsteady, and held by his two sons—continued to come to church and sit in an upholstered chair in the back of the sanctuary, his silent presence spoke loudly about the imminence of the inevitable. All of the dozen or so graduates from Faith Assembly Academy—many of whom were in college or lived in other cities—returned to Durham for a special service in which they all lined up in front of the congregation and took turns speaking to Bishop McKenzie who was seated in his chair in the back. Their words were saying “thank you,” but their voices sounded like they were saying “goodbye.”

Until the “Expect a Miracle Cancer Awareness Program” on October 14, however, I heard no one inside of the church utter anything resembling those words that Pastor McKenzie’s sister stated so bluntly: “…I knew that he would not survive.” Such a statement simply would not have been acceptable in Faith Assembly’s theological environment. Belief

54Significantly, none of the scriptures chosen by Pastor McKenzie included the word “healing;” they only spoke of “living.” Whether this “life” was in the here and now or in heaven was left open to interpretation. I found her choice of Job 33:18-30 to be especially striking in its imagery: “He keepeth back his soul from the pit, and his life from perishing by the sword. He is chastened also with pain upon his bed, and the multitude of his bones with strong pain: So that his life abhorreth bread, and his soul dainty meat. His flesh is consumed away, that it cannot be seen; and his bones that were not seen stick out. Yea, his soul draweth near unto the grave, and his life to the destroyers. If there be a messenger with him, an interpreter, one among a thousand, to shew unto man his uprightness: Then he is gracious unto him, and saith, Deliver him from going down to the pit: I have found a ransom. His flesh shall be fresher than a child's: he shall return to the days of his youth: He shall pray unto God, and he will be favourable unto him: and he shall see his face with joy: for he will render unto man his righteousness. He looketh upon men, and if any say, I have sinned, and perverted that which was right, and it profited me not; He will deliver his soul from going into the pit, and his life shall see the light. Lo, all these things worketh God oftentimes with man, To bring back his soul from the pit, to be enlightened with the light of the living.”
in divine healing is a crucial part of church members’ theology, as it is for most pentecostals. In addition, the idea of “positive confession”—a practice whereby believers speak only about positive outcomes as a way of making spiritual blessings manifest in the natural realm—resonates strongly at Faith Assembly. Although the church is nowhere near as strict and methodical about this practice as the “hard prosperity” ministries that brought it to prominence in the second half of the twentieth century, Faith Assembly’s leaders frequently emphasize the importance of thinking positively and “speaking faith.” They make clear that any words expressing doubt in God’s omnipotence are not welcome.

Despite this emphasis on positive speaking, however, words never tell the whole story for African American pentecostals. Their communicative world is filled with webs of complexly signifying sound, sight, motion, and touch, including melodies, moans, glossolalia, gestures, dance, hugging, and laying on hands. Through these communicative webs, nuanced “conversations” unfold before and beyond the words that people speak. Thus, choreographed dances like the one which was performed two-and-a-half weeks before McKenzie’s death play a crucial role in helping the community work through difficult times in which the words that people say are both insufficient and restricted by the dictates of their accepted theology.

September Dancing: September 23, 2012

On this Sunday morning Bishop Leroy McKenzie’s recently announced cancer diagnosis hung heavy in the air. McKenzie’s role as the church’s founder, head pastor, and patriarch has been discussed throughout this dissertation. Most of the 100 or so regular

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attendees at the church considered him not only their pastor but a personal friend. Several church members saw him as a father figure and regularly referred to him as “my spiritual father,” “like a father to me,” or even “the father I never had.”

McKenzie sat in his upholstered chair in the back of the sanctuary while Pastor Mary McKenzie presided over the service. By the time the Praise Team completed their second song the atmosphere in the church was like static electricity. The congregation crackled with bursts of tongues—speech and cries of “hallelujah!” One woman lay prostrate by the wall at the far side of the sanctuary, another knelt at the altar.

Pastor Mary McKenzie tried to move the service forward, but seemed powerless against the experiential tide. For several minutes she simply stood in front of the congregation, her silent presence embodying the ineffability of the moment. Finally, Pastor McKenzie reigned in the flood of feeling and welcomed up a group called the Women of Faith to “come bless us in dance.”

Six of the “church mothers,” each of them old enough to receive Social Security, stood in front of the congregation dressed in black and adorned with brightly colored sashes. They were still for a long moment while the sound technician fumbled with the recording. As the congregation waited, reverberant spasms of emotional overflow moved across the church body. Finally, the recording—an anthemic, mid-tempo, contemporary gospel radio hit by William McDowell called “I Won’t Go Back”—came on, played at the extreme volume that is customary at Faith Assembly. The disembodied recorded voices of a group of singers

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57 By using this metaphor I consciously invoke Cheryl Sanders’ insightful discussion of the dialectic between static and kinetic energy in Holiness-Pentecostal worship. See Sanders 1996, 59-63.

filled the sanctuary with the words, “I’ve been changed, healed, freed, delivered / I’ve found joy, peace, grace, and favor.”

The Women of Faith’s dance adhered to the same general aesthetic as most praise dances at Faith Assembly—one of the dancers would step forward and take the lead role with more individualized movements while the other five danced as a “chorus” behind her. All of their gestures correlated closely with the lyrics of the song. Compared to the younger dancers who perform more frequently at Faith Assembly, however, the Women of Faith’s dance had a different look and feel. It was characterized by what might be called an economy of motion. Unlike the dances described in the previous two case studies where the dancers utilized the entire stage space as well as the floor in front of the stage, the Women of Faith remained primarily in one spot. Naturally, these older women have neither the agility of body nor nimbleness of mind of younger dancers. They often looked as if they were focused intently on remembering the next motion, and rarely were the gestures of the background dancers tightly synchronized. But despite this—or more likely, because of it—there was something deeply earnest about the way their bodies moved. There was a tremendous openness, a kind of kinesthetic magnanimity. What their moving bodies revealed was not so much God’s gift of artistic skill, but instead something more like wisdom.

This wisdom is crucial because for African American pentecostals church mothers have long occupied a place of “tremendous power and authority.” Pentecostal historian Anthea Butler writes,

Perhaps it seems strange to attribute much power to the church mothers…[They] are not those who we normally think of as policy makers or theologians. Look closer. Church mothers are the women who recall the history of their churches, who chastise the pastor when he has interpreted the

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Thus, the bodies of the Women of Faith “spoke” with great significance as they moved before Faith Assembly’s congregation on September 23. As they danced, I looked out over the congregation from my place in the band pit as I have during hundreds of other dances. “Something is different,” I wrote in my fieldnotes that day, “not completely different—no one is doing anything I haven’t seen. It’s just more concentrated; a raisin instead of a grape.” Faces looked almost stunned, intently focused on the dancers at the front of the sanctuary. Those who sang along did so with reverent abandon. With their Bishop’s enfeebled presence inescapably in their midst, churchgoers turned their attention, with direct and powerful force, toward the one group of church members with the wisdom and life experience to help “get them through” this difficult time. As the lyrics of the song’s anthemic chorus boomed through the sanctuary—“I won’t go back, can’t go back, to the way it used to be / For your presence came and changed me”—the Women of Faith seemed to be teaching their church about the inevitability of loss and how the living must continue living; about the perpetual ebb and flow of joy and suffering and the unyielding insistence of time.

What exactly this dance did, or meant, for Faith Assembly’s congregation is difficult to say. I spoke to several congregants about it after the service who agreed that it stood out as an especially powerful moment. “The anointing was thick,” one woman said. Another put it in similarly vague terms saying, “There was such an awesome atmosphere.” I did not push for specifics. In hindsight I recognize that any sense of trying to distinguish my roles as researcher and community member broke down at this point. I did not push for specific

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60Ibid. See also Clarence Hardy, “Church Mothers and Pentecostals in the Modern Age,” in Afro-Pentecostalism: Black Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in History and Culture, edited by Katherine Attanasi and Amos Yong (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 83-93.
interpretations because I did not want them. The reality of Bishop McKenzie’s illness had become extremely difficult for me. With the possible exception of one or two of my professors, McKenzie had played a more crucial role in my personal and professional development than anyone else in my life. So much about my present activities and future plans was deeply intertwined with our relationship. The knowledge that he would soon take his final breath weighed heavily upon me; and this weight was increased by the fact that I felt restricted in my ability to verbalize this to my fellow churchgoers. “Death and life are in the power of the tongue,” reads Proverbs 18:21. I had heard this verse at Faith Assembly so many times; often presented quite literally—one’s words may actually cause life or death to occur. I knew better than to “speak death” within the walls of the church.

Amid these overwhelming feelings, the church mothers’ dance brought a powerful sense of release to me personally. Something both extraordinary and necessary had taken place. Somehow the air had been cleared. The dance had reached those places where words were either restricted or impotent. This was my experience, at least, and there was surface-level evidence that it was shared by others in the church. But I was scared to push too far. What if someone had a completely different experience? What if someone merely poked fun at the way the older women danced? Here I was, feeling newly able to cope with what were extremely difficult circumstances for me, and—maybe it was simple selfishness—but I could not bear to risk the possibility of depleting that strength in the interest of what could potentially be more broadly-sourced research.

Perhaps this exemplifies the moment of crisis for those who choose to conduct ethnographic research within a community that they have long been part of—the kind of moment that anthropologists and ethnomusicologists avoided for many years by not engaging
in such research. Is the scholarly endeavor irrevocably compromised when we choose to value what the community gives us on a personal level above what we gain on a professional level? Should we choose to omit these moments from our accounts, lest we tip the scales away from scholarship and toward autobiography? Sometimes there may be clear answers to these questions. Often, however, it is a matter of balance and context.61

In the present case, I believe I gained an understanding of the Faith Assembly community that might have been clouded rather than sharpened by more interpretive discussion. In previous conversations, churchgoers had told me that “dance speaks to your circumstance;” that it “ministers to your situation;” and that it helps “lift burdens” and “break yokes.” Upon reflection I realized that the Women of Faith’s dance from September 23 had revealed to me a much fuller knowledge of these concepts. Though I felt like I had a cognitive grasp on what these sayings meant, this dance imparted a deeper holistic understanding: this is what it is like when your “situation” is “ministered to.” Taken in the context of my many years of diverse experiences at Faith Assembly, I believe that foregrounding a personal interpretation of the Women of Faith’s dance helps to reveal some of choreographed dance’s capacities to shape experience and belief at Faith Assembly in a manner more direct than a discussion of the verbalized interpretations of fellow churchgoers.

CONCLUSION: Dance, Performativity, and Local Empowerment

In the “Roundtable on the Future of Black Churches” held at Columbia University in 2010, the prominent African American pastor and theologian Reverend Otis Moss III was insistent that a “love ethic” was critical for contemporary black Christians. This had to come, he explained, through nurturing a deep spirituality and the kind of relationships—between

people and between people and God—that only thrive with a developed sense of spiritual “interiority.” Certainly, he clarified, being socially and politically engaged is also highly important, but it is not a substitute for spirituality. “You have a lot of people who are incredibly prophetic,” he retorted, “but yet they are spiritually anemic.” 62

But what exactly this spirituality looked like in practice, and how exactly it should be nurtured, was not clarified by Moss (or by any of the other panel participants). Moss did clarify, however, what was not nurturing it. This kind of spirituality was being overshadowed, he claimed, by the “prosperity ministry,” and by “theological exotic dancers and all of that.” 63 He further explained his belief that the “real work of the church is not happening necessarily in the big mega churches, but it is happening in churches that are 75 and less [with] people who are doing incredible work on the ground.” 64

Moss was making some very important points, but he was doing so with recourse to sweeping stereotypes that flatten and dismiss practices and experiences that are central to the lives of millions of black Christians. I found his use of the phrase “theological exotic dancing”—which he intoned with eye-rolling sarcasm—especially striking. I have attended dozens of African American churches in North Carolina and Houston, Texas, and used the internet to research many others; all of which practice choreographed dance. Not once, however, have I heard dance described as either “theological” or “exotic.” Practitioners I have encountered commonly use the terms “liturgical dance” or “praise dance.” Moss’s

62 See “Is the Black Church Dead? A Roundtable on the Future of Black Churches,” http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7r8Djfxu1Bk. These comments from Rev. Moss occur between 42:30 and 45:00.

63 Ibid. See Moss’ opening remarks beginning at 29:30.

64 Ibid. It should be noted that the church pastored by Rev. Moss, Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, has over 8,500 members. (This is the church formerly pastored by Rev. Jeremiah Wright which occupied the national spotlight in 2008 because of Barack Obama’s affiliation with it and statements made by Wright that were perceived by many of Obama’s political opponents as dangerously radical).
choice of labels fostered easy dismissal of the activity, a rhetorical technique common to modern political discourse. The word “exotic” slyly but unmistakably connected dancing in church to dancing in a strip club.

Importantly, Moss is not opposed to dance per se. He is, in fact, a proponent of building contemporary church practice on the “pillars of hip-hop: …rap or orality, technology,…dance, and artistic aspects which we call graffiti.” For Moss, dance that is consonant with a hip-hop aesthetic is in, while dance that conforms to the aesthetic most frequently represented on Christian television is out. Moss thus adopts a stance common among contemporary African American clergy and theologians trained in traditions of black theology; a stance deeply invested in a particular vision of authentic blackness. Unpacking the historical development and full implications of this stance and its vision of the authentic black Christian would require another dissertation. I broach the subject here only to make the claim that the argument I have presented in this chapter about the role of dance at Faith Assembly reveals some of the unexamined assumptions on which such a stance is built. Moss speaks of television ministry (the Word Network), “theological exotic dancing,” and megachurches as if they were all spun from the same fabric; a fabric which is antithetical to the flourishing of black Christian practice in the current historical moment. He also presents an idealistic vision of “the real work of the church…happening in churches that are 75 and less,” without acknowledging the pervasive (though certainly not uniform) influence of prosperity ministry and liturgical dance in many of these institutions.

65.“Is the Black Church Dead?” video, comments beginning at 1:52:20.

66.He explicitly blames the Word Network—a Christian cable station featuring predominantly African American ministries—for inculcating in black Christians that “the model” is “theological exotic dancing.” “Is the Black Church Dead?” video, remarks beginning at 29:30.
Moss’ broader assessment of contemporary black churches is spot on. He says, “the reality for the black church is: it is a model of humanness and dysfunction that struggles with priestly and prophetic, not one or the other; but it’s constantly struggling with the priestly and the prophetic, constantly struggling with the private, the personal, and also the public.” The church is constantly struggling to negotiate these realms, and the people within the church—in all their “humanness and dysfunction”—are struggling to negotiate them as well. At a church like Faith Assembly, choreographed dance is a particularly important avenue for undertaking these negotiations. Dance equips churchgoers to deal with the challenges and contradictions of life and belief.

Dance, however, is limited in what it is able to accomplish. It is rarely, if ever, prophetic in the politically and socially engaged sense that the term has most frequently been used. It is not a substitute for particular kinds of public action. Dance, as Moss worries, can also easily become a channel through which the aesthetics of televised worship are adopted into local spaces, often without a critical conversation about what messages may be attached to the medium. Choreographed dance as it is practiced at Faith Assembly is not unequivocally good. It can, however, play a consequential role in how believers understand themselves and their religious beliefs and practices.

This interpretation raises a question that I believe is important for the broader conversation about contemporary black churches. It was a question posed both explicitly and obliquely by the moderator, Josef Sorrett, during the Columbia “Roundtable on the Future of Black Churches.” Sorett inquired: “Now, in a post-soul moment, in a post-Civil Rights moment [characterized by] competing interests, diversification, class divide: what does the

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67“Is the Black Church Dead?” video, remarks beginning at 29:30.
prophetic look like in that milieu? In other words, if the prophetic is not what it was in the era of Dr. King, what is it? Each of the panelists, however, deftly avoided a response.

Among African Americans who discuss the prophetic there is general agreement that acting prophetically means making sure community members have what they need to thrive despite the wishes or actions of prevailing socio-political powers. It also involves “indicting” these powers, as Obery Hendricks puts it. But there is rarely agreement on what precisely such an indictment looks like. If we focus on the first part of the equation, community members in a church like Faith Assembly thrive when they are empowered to negotiate the complexities of life and belief. How do they navigate an existence characterized by the experience of both free will and predestination? How do they make the concepts of prosperity and wealth operative in their lives while living in “a world of want?” How do they handle the loss of their church community’s founder, spiritual guide, and father figure? For Faith Assembly, dance is critical to each of these challenges; and it edifies and empowers the community in ways that other forms of expression are not able to do. In a New York Times article that discussed the emerging phenomenon of liturgical dance in black churches one of the interviewees, Karen Farnum, said, “Most of us are kinetic…. Although the songs are saying the words, when you see it in our bodies it elevates the message. We’re able to look into people’s faces and feel what they’re feeling. We’re going through the same thing.” Dance fosters human connection; it nurtures empathy. And this helps the community and its members to thrive. Dance can be locally empowering. It is not a substitute

68Ibid., 52:35.

69Jackson, Life Within Limits: Well-Being in a World of Want.

for the kinds of socio-politically engaged action that most black theologians call for, but it may be a model or motivator for these kinds of action. Dance also offers one avenue through which to tackle fundamental questions of meaning such as: How can we rethink the relationship between the priestly and the prophetic, the spiritual and the practical, and explore lived practice in a way that may help reconcile competing visions of black Christianity?
CONCLUSION

*Hearing Faith* has explored church-based musical practice and the Spirit-filled imagination as means through which African American pentecostals negotiate the challenges and tensions of contemporary life. Growing out of sustained participation and research at one church—Faith Assembly Christian Center—this dissertation has attempted to work from the inside out, and thus avoid the hierarchical (“top down” or “bottom up”) logic that often characterizes, explicitly or implicitly, scholarly accounts. “Society is not peaked like a pyramid or layered like a cake,” writes Henry Glassie in a passage that has guided my thinking about *Hearing Faith* since the project’s early stages.

It is composed of communities simultaneously occupying space and time at the same human level. Some are composed of upper-class fox-hunters, some of middle-class scholars, some of poor farmers. All seem reasonable from within, strange from without, silent at a distance. The way to study people is not from the top down or the bottom up, but from the inside out, from the place where people are articulate to the place where they are not, from the place where they are in control of their destinies to the place where they are not.¹

Within each of the overlapping communities that constitute society, people have agency and power. By focusing on musical practice and the Spirit-filled imagination, I have attempted to foreground the agency and power of believers at Faith Assembly. But in contemporary African American pentecostal communities, even “the inside” is complex and contested territory. For example, while *Hearing Faith* has shown musical practice at Faith Assembly to be an area of deep significance, facilitating the negotiation of religious and

existential challenges that are difficult to address through other means, the musical practices adopted by this community—disseminated as they are through mass-media channels and aesthetically informed by televised worship—are inextricably connected to the encroachment of consumer culture into the church. Thus, one of the most prominent ways that churchgoers exert power and control within their communities is bound up with the very forces that, according to many scholars, limit the extent of black Christians’ power and control in society more broadly. A 2011 special edition of Pneuma: The Journal for the Society of Pentecostal Studies collected the writings of leading scholars working at the intersection of contemporary African American pentecostalism and the mass media. These scholars expressed a collective “fear…that Pentecostal faith communities have so interiorized the technologies of mass media that they can hardly recognize their presence or influence.”

Hearing Faith does not refute this claim, or necessarily offer anything to alleviate such a “fear.” Its discussion of the Spirit-filled imagination does, however, invite readers to consider a more multi-faceted understanding of power within the media-saturated environment of contemporary African American pentecostalism; an understanding that can help nuance some of the polemic debates surrounding black churches today. The Spirit-filled imagination is a mode of being connected to particular kinds of intellectual and embodied knowledge; it plays a central role in African American pentecostals’ sense of empowerment amid life’s various situations and circumstances. Power, in the Spirit-filled imagination is not—in contrast to conceptions of power often portrayed in the mass media—

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3Such as the debated that erupted following Eddie Glaude’s 2010 piece, “The Black Church is Dead,” The Huffington Post (February 24, 2010), http://www.huffingtonpost.com/eddie-glaude-jr-phd/the-black-church-is-dead_b_473815.html.
simply the ability to influence other humans, or the ability to acquire status, wealth, and so on. Spirit-filled power is intimately connected to the experience of spiritual agency and the Spirit-led ability to negotiate effectively and confidently between the twin necessities of humbly accepting the depth of life’s mysteries and boldly acting in the face of those mysteries.

The Spirit-filled imagination recognizes that “His ways are not our ways” and that humans can only see “through a glass, darkly.”⁴ “Your whole life is a mystery,” Pastor Mary McKenzie preached one Sunday morning at Faith Assembly,

> How did I come through 3 or 4 generations of alcoholics and not become one myself?...I said it’s a mystery...It’s a mystery. How did I not know anything about God, but He called me to preach? That’s a mystery. He’ll take your whole ugly life and turn it around...Praise God. It’s a mystery. Your life is a mystery. How do you learn what your life is about? As you walk through life, God reveals your life.⁵

Existence is mysterious, even inscrutable, say African American pentecostals, and people cannot escape the vast abyss of uncertainty; they can only hope to be guided through it. “We walk by faith,” the congregation at Faith Assembly declares exuberantly each week, “not by sight.” Believers use the sonic and embodied practices of worship to exercise the Spirit-filled imagination in a way that strives toward power but it is built on a foundation of faith. For this community, faith and power are endlessly and inextricably connected. An empowered existence necessitates that believers make the “double movement” of Søren Kierkegaard’s “knight of faith;” as religious studies scholar Mark Taylor explains it: “First, there is the movement of infinite resignation in which you let go of everything that once possessed you; only then do you become free to reappropriate what you have given up by receiving life as a

⁴Isaiah 55:8; 1 Corinthians 13:12.

⁵Pastor Mary McKenzie, FACC, February 24, 2013.
Bishop and Pastor McKenzie frequently exhorted congregants at Faith Assembly both to “let go and let God,” and to “make it happen.” While such statements may sound contradictory to people outside of the community, they index the “double movement” that walking “by faith” requires.

Living a life that is a gift from an inscrutable other necessitates—to use one of Bishop Leroy McKenzie’s favorite rhetorical dichotomies—continually working on “relationship” (with God and people) rather than living according to the over-confidence of “religiosity.” Thus, *Hearing Faith* has studied musical practice as something that community members use to negotiate existence within webs of human relationships, rather than something that primarily presents substance (such as doctrine or theology). By foregrounding subjects like the problem of free will, the search for well-being in a world of limited access to resources, and the way individuals and communities deal with the unspeakable experience of loss, this dissertation has proceeded in a manner that embraces anthropologist Steven Friedson’s observation that “Lifeworlds are filled not with substance but with existence.” While *Hearing Faith* has worked to provide new insights into the practices of the African American Spirit-filled community, and to expand the study of sound (including silence) and embodiment within that community, this is not where the work stops. It also strives to more broadly “awaken existential echoes” in its readers.

Ultimately, I hope that *Hearing Faith* offers a model that could be applied to studies of many different types of human communities; an approach that attends closely to the

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8Paul Stoller, “In Sierra Leone (review),” *Anthropological Quarterly* 78/2 (Spring, 2005), 488.
practices of one group as a means through which to illuminate existential issues and struggles shared across a broad range of humanity. One of the great strengths of ethnomusicology as a discipline, I believe, is that it explores elements of human practice that make people, and groups of people, distinct—their construction and performance of unique identities, for example, or their resistance to hegemonic forces. Hearing Faith’s model embraces this focus on what makes people unique as a way of working outward to the places where they are the same, not to downplay the significance of their differences but to recognize that people within all communities live lives shaped by the desire and struggle to exist better.
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