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# Understanding Christianity Through Presentation and Practice: An Ethnographic Research Study

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Having grown up in the Midwest, I have seen the localized practice of Christianity as a way of life for many members of small communities. Christian protocols cultivate a mindset of fellowship outside the sanctuary. Praying for members of the community that do and do not regularly attend services instilled in me a curiosity about community dynamics through religious practices. This research-based study describes the congregation of a small country church known as The Harmony Church<sup>1</sup> through regular attendance at Sunday services, weekly music practices, Bible study, and prayer meetings as well as monthly business meetings. Using ethnographic methods of participant observation and interviews, I discuss how the congregation understands and values their General Baptist Christian practice locally, as well as perceive its presentation globally.

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## Introduction

To understand the complexities of Christian faith and practice in today's societies, I searched for an opportunity to explore the matter academically through my small corner of the Midwest and beyond. I began my ethnographic research locally, but reflected globally, on how Christianity operates in the realm of religious identity and how it does or does not affect our decisions made within the community. Throughout this article I discuss my immersive study of a small, country church in which regular attendance is no more than forty members. It is here that I attended weekly services, music practice, Bible study sessions, prayer meetings, and monthly business meetings. Each opportunity to connect with regular attendees allowed for a better understanding of the relationship that is established between believers and God through Jesus Christ. This discussion is pivotal in expanding religious studies to a deeper interpretation of the necessity of community and locality in the growing, globalized nation of America.

## Methods

I chose to study The Harmony Church located in my small town, and used participant observation and interview processes to not only be interpersonal but make me more approachable in the field. I wanted to be acknowledged as a regular member to the extent that there would be no fear of outward judgement. As I gravitated from sitting in the back of the church, to a simple introduction at the altar, members grew in their confidence to discuss their religious identity and their personal convictions with me. It is important to have an easy, natural approach regarding content to ensure that congregants are open and accepting of the anthropologist's documentations (Patterson 2023, 20). In preparation for doing participant observation, I reviewed Harry Wolcott's, *Ethnography: A Way of Seeing*, in which he mentions:

Participant observation lends confusion because the label is used in two different ways, in some cases referring to all the activities in which fieldworkers engage, at other times being paired off with its complement, interviewing, to highlight two major

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<sup>1</sup> A pseudonym.

activities into which fieldwork can be subdivided, participant observation and interviewing. As a result, participant observation is sometimes employed as an umbrella term to describe everything that ethnographers do—indeed, that all on-site researchers do in the field—and is also employed by others to refer to any fieldwork activity that is not some form of interviewing. (Wolcott, 2008)

Although participant observation is an umbrella term that constitutes several ethnographic field activities, I heavily regarded this method as a main avenue toward obtaining the insider perspective (Patterson 2023, 20).

Many of my conversations were of the casual and informal form of participant observation, but I did follow up with questions that might broaden the conversation and provide additional insight (Patterson 2023, 23). I focused on themes of transition in values, religion in daily life, and salvation to cultivate three key questions:

1. Do you believe / are you concerned we as a community and nation are experiencing cultural shifts that will retract our obedience and further detour our acceptance into Heaven? How does that make you feel?
2. What are some of your daily / weekly routines done out of religious intent?
3. How do you believe you have received God's salvation?

In order to obtain an insider, or emic, perspective on these questions, I did both formal and informal interviews with the directors of the church to gain insight into the implied values Christians hold in their culturally-based reasoning about action in daily life. I interviewed the Pastor's wife, Jen, early in my ethnographic research, and then later interviewed both Pastor Nick and Jen. I asked them a series of questions ranging from the physical aspects of service structure and musical choice to the metaphysical purpose and fulfillment in Christian practice of baptisms and communion. The discussions provided an understanding of Christian identity and communal activity, as well as of the perceived necessity of a revival of spiritual guidance.

## The Harmony Church

The Harmony Church has been an establishment of Christian religious expression for 130 years (as of October 2022) and counting. In the Midwest, some form of Christian or Catholic religion is bound to be a part of the weekly (if not daily) life routine of most people. The Harmony Church is located in a small town between miles of corn fields, with just one gas station, a library, and a post office. Other businesses in which people make their living are 15 miles north, leaving the town with the feeling of quaint, old-fashioned times. Those looking for solitude would find this peaceful in our country's current state of friction. With such strong local identity, there are potential hazards to being closed off from the fast pace of the larger world. Hazards of boredom among the community's youth leads to substance abuse, and mental illness, for which resources are limited and divine intervention seems to be the last believable resort, are found among the youth of this community. The older members of the community believe attending regular services at The Harmony Church is part of the small town's charm as well as providing a religious identity that keeps people grounded and connected, and builds the community's moral structure. Understanding this generational gap in views about the value of religious influence was a point of interest for me in my ethnographic research. Studying religion in small communities that range in population size from 1,300-2,900 residents can help us to understand better the local and global contextualization of Christianity (Patterson 2023, 26).

At the outset, I discovered that at the time of my initial introduction to the church, there were no youth that regularly attended weekly events at The Harmony Church. In delving into the literature on religious generational gaps in America, I found that H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* was helpful. According to Niebuhr, Christianity is a religion with a multitude of communities. No two churches are the same, each one taking on a unique perspective on following Christian customs and living in a community in which the image of God is representative. An interesting note made by Niebuhr regarding our inherent human characteristic to divide and categorize, is that we seem to have ". . . an unconquerable tendency to think in terms of in-group and out-group, of self and other (Niebuhr 1951, 134.)" During my ethnographic research, I found that those in the congregation discussing those outside the congregation believed the

latter were misguided by their own interpretations of scripture. Congregants also discussed their concern that those who did not uphold the value of religious identity to aid them in their moral reasoning were going to have issues throughout this life as well as with their souls acceptance in the afterlife.

Upon entering The Harmony Church, I received a hospitable acceptance from the members due to our shared religious identity. I identified key aspects of the church's service structure and regular cross-denominational Christian activities including communion, baptism, Advent, and celebratory dinners. I then observed music and prayer, weekly Bible studies, and the business developments of the church. And, as mentioned above, I further discussed these activities in two formal interviews with Pastor Nick and his wife, Jen.

Just a few weeks after my basic observations made from the back of the church sanctuary, Pastor Nick came up to me and asked, "How do you feel about possibly helping out with the service?" I did not hesitate in saying "yes". I viewed this as an opportunity to do participant observation. Thankfully, the congregation was open and willing to share their experiences with me upon my introduction at the altar (Patterson 2023, 29-30). As I initially only did the weekly announcements and some personal reflection, it was a rather short time I spent as the center of attention in the eyes of the congregation. Generally, the announcements consisted of weekly music practice, Bible study sessions, and prayer meeting reminders, as well as noting special dinners after Sunday services in instances of holidays and communal celebrations. There were also instances in which the church focused on donations or special offerings for those needing assistance. These announcements reflected the church's involvement in the community, as well as in the congregation; there is a sense of reciprocity in this regard. In each week's message, Pastor Nick did not follow in the tradition of picking apart a few verses, narrowing down the meaning and correlating the message back to modern usage. Rather, he would discuss scriptures, philosophers, fellow theologians, and real-world stories that would align with similar themes and connective concepts that the congregation could reflect on, not only in their own lives, but in the community as well.

I further discussed with Jen her reasoning and perspective on the church services, given that she was the one to develop them (Patterson 2023, 31-32). She commented,

I think it varies per person and per style. I tend to go a little more with the idea and then build it from there, since I'm not the sole sermon provider at this juncture, probably won't ever be, but I like my style of researching it. Taking it all the way to scripture, then taking it all the way back to the King James Version as I can, and then I like to search for two or three women's perspectives on the sermon. I feel many of our messages in sermons are men centered, and I always strive to find a woman's perspective on scripture.

Jen strives for inclusivity as well as suggesting that there is not one way to learn scripture that is solely correct and current in relation to its meaning in today's Christianity.

As previously mentioned, each church dynamic is different. The importance placed on scripture is circumstantially dynamic as well. While scripture can be used to justify Christian moral and ethical standards of congregants, within The Harmony Church there are an abundance of members that openly recite scripture primarily to better their personal understanding and its usage in guidance for faith. The themes emerging from my observations of weekly services include: glorifying God, obedience to God, turning fears into prayer, and the unconditional love of God (Patterson 2023, 32). I find these themes to be pivotal to all believers, encouraging them to find and keep the faith (Patterson 2023, 32).

In communion weeks, Pastor Nick would often address topics such as devotion to Christ, glorifying the Savior, salvation through service, and obedience. Through this, I believe the emphasis on faith for this church's congregation lies in devotional practices and communal representation of devotion to one another as well (Patterson 2023, 32-33). At the distribution of communion, Pastor Nick would remind the congregation that the bread embodies the body of Christ in his sacrifice, and the juice, that of the blood of Christ (Luke 22:19-20). "In the scripture, it tells us to take communion as often as necessary . . . in reality, I could take communion four times a day just to have a closer walk with God and be in that spirit I need to be at." With this reflection, Pastor Nick tries to link communion to daily religious practice. During my time at The Harmony Church, the opportunity arose to formally observe a Christian Baptist baptism, and to engage in further discussion about one's salvation in service and how believers perceive and know about developing a further relationship with God through

Jesus Christ. The Baptist denomination believes the person must be wholly immersed in water, unlike other Christian denominations that follow protocols of affusion, or water being poured over the individual, and aspersion, or sprinkling water over the individual (Byer, 2014). The formality of baptism is important to the church image and congregation. As it brings a new level of trust and religious guidance to the individual receiving the baptism, it is a joyful celebration accompanied by silence as the new member's connection with God has just become greater (Patterson 2023, 44).

In the weeks of special events and holidays, the topics addressed in services shift. As the discussion usually encompasses the special events and are less guided by scripture, these services seem more personable to an extent. These weeks of special commemorations lead to personal testimonies and religious reflection by congregants, and are also commemorated in special activities and decorations around the church. Advent was the first cross-denominational practice I attended at The Harmony Church. It is traditionally celebrated by Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Episcopalians, Lutherans, and other Protestants (Gillan, 2006), and commemorates the four weeks prior to Jesus' birth and the preparations Christians make for that event. Banners with Advent themes of hope, peace, joy, and love were hung each week leading up to Christmas, and there were specific scripture readings and the lighting of the candle for that week's theme. I discussed with Pastor Nick and Jen their connection to the season of Advent and their understanding of the reasons for its celebration, not only in The Harmony Church, but also globally within Christianity. Though Pastor Nick's preference to celebrate Advent was to maintain a local tradition, there are celebrations of Advent by Christians around the globe as well (Patterson 2023, 38-39).

Celebratory dinners were not necessarily devout or serious events, but rather emphasized the communal aspect of the congregation. As I asked congregants their personal understanding of and value on the special events dinners, many responded that the dinners were an opportunity to socialize and reflect on communal connections. In pursuit of a more theological reverence in community dinners, I asked Pastor Nick and Jen about their understanding of the significance of such gatherings. As he chuckled and reflected on his first year's services at the church, Pastor Nick commented, "It was an expectation;

everyone knew what they were bringing." So church dinners were largely viewed as an opportunity to get the community together and socialize.

### **Worship through Music**

Music is essential for this church and the practice of Christianity beyond this church. To understand its significance in the weekly service, I asked Jen how the music is chosen each week, and about its importance to this church. Jen paused and reflected on their first services eight years ago when they became church directors, saying,

It was strictly traditional. Over time, we evolved into a blend of contemporary [and traditional]. . . If he's [Pastor Nick] going to talk about vision, then I have enough skills to say oh [we will sing] "Be Thou My Vision." Or if it's Easter, I know we sing "He Lives." The talent of our music selection is that we have a minister of a lifelong music career, and most of his military career [he] organized music. He really has two gifts, in addition to the pastor aspect. One is an integrated program, . . . [and the other is that] he is very much more theme based. (Patterson 2023, 47)

Since the congregation is primarily older, their familiarity with the traditional hymns leads to more involvement in singing the hymns, though they do equally enjoy the contemporary music as well. With The Harmony Church's music team consisting of a vocalist, drummer, pianist, and guitarist, the sanctuary is lively with performances at every opportunity (Patterson 2023, 45-46).

The defining aspect of Christian music is its lyrical content rather than its musical style. In the article, "Watering Down Christianity? An Examination of Use of Theological Words in Christian Music," Megan Livengood and Connie L. Book note, "Christian music lyrics [are] rooted in notions of framing theory. Frames are created when selected pieces of information about a certain idea, person, or object are more memorable to audiences. The selected information then becomes the 'dominant meaning' for the idea, person, or object" (Entman 1993 as cited by Livengood and Book, 2004).

Through establishing rapport with congregants, I was invited to music practice. As I developed another layer of participant observation, I began to assist in maintaining a basic rhythm at times by playing the box drum or egg-shaped wooden objects called rice

shakers. Personal testimonies arose during music practice, and there was a sense of the value of service. Some did not attend other weekly events the church hosts, but they attended music practice as a way to feel more comfortable in their expression of praise and worship to God. As I could already play basic percussion instruments, I was then introduced to the ukulele, an instrument that was small, versatile, easily learned, and overall enjoyable to hear (Patterson 2023, 49). I was very hesitant at first, so much so that I could barely strum the four strings. As willing as I was to participate, I was not as willing to mess up the music. When I expressed my nervousness, I was told to “Exhale all doubt.” This was a simple, yet profoundly true statement, and I reflect on this moment often. I find this suggestion to be appropriate in situations of doubted belief in the metaphysical as well. While believers are made in the image of God, they are also imperfect. Hence doubts can be a part of the Christian lived experience as well, and “Exhale all doubt” can be a helpful means of retaining hope in the gift of salvation (Patterson 2023, 49).

### **Weekly Prayer Meetings and Bible Study**

In the new year, a member of the congregation recommended developing a weekly prayer meeting. She was familiar with such meetings from previous church settings, and her reason for introducing it to this church was to “Bring a collective understanding of the effects of spiritual rain.” The idea was that active prayer would encourage the curiosity of those outside the regular church congregation or those unfamiliar with God in general, and might draw them to attend services and ask about forgiveness as well as salvation (Patterson 2023, 53). Pastor Nick began the prayer meeting with prayer and Bible verses that reflected the potential mood or direction of discussion for the meeting. Jen set the ground rules: what was said stays in the circle, no one is interrupted, and no one should feel forced or obligated. As we stated praises for the week, followed with concerns—either personal or communal—the discussion was open, with emotions abundant in each prayer meeting. The first meeting was very emotional in all areas. There was an overarching feeling of interpersonal uncertainty, as well as uncertainty about the reactions to the concerns being expressed. But with instructions to have a listening ear, and to avoid conversation and personal perspectives on others’ concerns, the level of comfort and respect established was greater in prayer meetings

than in Bible studies or Sunday services. Once we each completed our testimonies and concerns, we each prayed, with no standard format, just purely by will. It was here that I felt the most challenged. As I had never prayed publicly, only within the comfort of my own thoughts, I was easily intimidated. This was Jen’s circumstance as well. She mentioned it wasn’t until the pandemic struck that she had had to pray out loud in the services that were live streamed each week. With this, she reminded herself to *exhale all doubt*. This became a reoccurring personal reminder over the duration of my ethnography.

The weekly Bible studies began at high noon with prayer and lunch. With themes of the weekly Sunday service encompassing obedience, glory, guidance, and salvation, there were some consecutive overlapping themes in the Bible study sessions (Patterson 2023, 53-54). Themes of obedience and glory in God were heavily covered, indicating that the ultimate thing humans can do to fulfill God’s wishes is to be obedient and faithful in having a walk with Jesus Christ and to seek the gift of salvation, as previously mentioned. Other themes of adoption, humbled in God’s presence, the fight of temptations of the flesh, and grace were all covered in Bible study sessions (Patterson 2023, 53-54).

The study sessions consisted of lecture-discussion driven conversations. Along with reading and reflecting on the material of the chosen Bible chapter, there was also reference to Max Lucado’s, *Life Lessons from Romans*, in which the aim of the text was to bring the words of Paul to the readers life circumstances and guide readers, with the knowledge that, “The wrong solutions are pleasure and pride (Romans 1-2), and the correct solution is Christ Jesus (3:21-26). According to Paul, we are saved by grace (undeserved, unearned favor), through faith (complete trust) in Jesus and his work” (Lucado 2018, ix). Lucado also suggests that the understood purpose of the Bible is to provide us with the opportunity of seeking salvation.

In order to assess the importance of the Bible to The Harmony Church, I asked Pastor Nick and Jen what relevance they find in the scripture and how do they understand its use in their lives as well as that of the congregation. Pastor Nick mentioned that the importance the Bible holds for believers instills a biblical worldview in the congregation. “The one that has the biblical world view has stimulated a lot of thoughts [reflecting] the culture we are in now, it has opened the door to a new revival of the Christian worldview and what that means. It is heartfelt because

I am experiencing things that I know God is working me through them.” As he broadens this discussion, he identifies three points at which the biblical world view should instill in believers a walk of faith. It is through truth, submission, and relationships that believers can continue to follow the path of religious guidance, maintaining faithfulness in the midst of worldly distractions (Patterson 2023, 51-52).

Bible study provided insight into individual variations in interpreting scripture. While there are some readers that are very literal, and categorized the dos and don'ts of Christian expectations depicted in the scripture, there were others of this church that considered circumstance and the cultural dos and don'ts of Jesus' time, suggesting that the implementation of scripture may involve a whole new meaning which has shifted over time. In the study group I found there was a healthy combination of both types, allowing for discussion and consideration to take place. The believers participating in the Bible study group had respect for opposing opinions and takeaways from scripture. As we see in the news media today, there are some raging religious folk doing radical things in the name of God. As a result, there are misconceived notions in the general public that believers are not wanting to participate in an authentic faith (Patterson 2023, 51-52). It is so often we forget the Apostle Paul's comment in Romans 12:18, “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.”

The Harmony Church practices prayer regularly through service and weekly meetings. The newly developed Thursday night prayer meeting is where the communication, not only with God, but with fellow community members, is prevalent, abundant, and comfortable. The discussions range from lighthearted requests to emotional, difficult fears and uncertainties. It is in those moments that members of the meeting ask fellow members to pray for them (Patterson 2023, 60-61). This is a direct avenue for members to build each other up in their beliefs and faith, as well as to care for one another beyond religious obligations, and it reflects positively within the community, not just in the congregation and sanctuary.

### **Business Meetings and Outreach**

Observing the church's business meeting was very informative for understanding the future and concerns of the church. Business meetings were held the first Wednesday of each month, and all congregants were invited to attend. Matters such as account totals,

church repairs, donations, and new installations were all discussed. In a traditional business meeting fashion, one member would make a motion to action, and another would second the motion or discuss resolutions. Generally, the meetings were small, and everyone was respectful of motioned statements. Financially, the church is stable, and able to help out other organizations. I believe this is a positive thing as rural churches are morphing congregations together due to low attendance and financial strain (Patterson 2023, 54-55). The Harmony Church also received a grant which allowed for a new camera installation to live stream services to do outreach via YouTube.

While outreach is being done to maintain and grow the congregation, there are concerns about the continued success of The Harmony Church. The necessity to bring in new congregants is apparent. Specifically, the church would like to bring in younger families with children, as there are currently no children or children's ministry in the church (Patterson 2023, 54-55). This is largely because the current congregation is older, with their children already grown. With this comes the question, “Why are there no children and families attending The Harmony Church?” The answer to this could go in multiple directions. Locally, Pastor Nick and Jen have only been this church's directors for eight years, making their influence and presentation seem new, though they are viewed as prominent and involved members of the community. Furthermore, the church is a rural country church for which there is no proper transportation or access for children who want to be involved, but whose parents may not have the resources, health, or determination to come to church. Much of the community is financially supported by a local car building factory. While this brings financial stability, it also brings excessive labor with only the weekend to rest. Religious activities are second in this regard. Globally too the importance of work in the economy and maintaining one's household can take priority. As the cost of living is gradually climbing, the understanding that one must rest up on the weekends and be healthy to work becomes predominant.

While the globalization of economic life is a factor in this church's continued success, the cultural representation of Christian ideals is equally concerning. Throughout the duration of my ethnographic work, there was discussion of the end of the church era amongst many congregants. They discussed this not only with regard to their community involvement, but also the state of our country.

Members believe that through prayer, recommendation, public connection, and communal events, the opportunity to discuss what is going on at the church will bring people to the sanctuary and provide them with the gift of salvation, along with what that involves in an eschatological sense. The obligation people used to feel (potentially) to go to church to prove to the community that you are guided by faith is no more. This is a concern for the members because it represents the possibility that loved ones will not be saved (Patterson 2023, 56). So, the lack of children and family members the church is currently experiencing is coming up in business meetings, urging them to recommend new waves of outreach. Through advertisements of church activities via social media, the church hopes to bring in children, old members, newcomers to the religion, along with genuinely curious individuals who might learn about Christian practice. The hope for 2023 is to have a children's ministry, greater community involvement, Sunday school installations, and more discussion of salvation and guidance for understanding a walk with Christ (Patterson 2023, 56).

## **Tithing**

Upon completing the ethnographic field research for this study, I had to review observation notes, formal interview recordings, and contextualize informal conversation with congregants in a way that illuminated their understanding of Christian faith and practice within the context of global Christianity. An example of this connection can be found in tithing. The Harmony Church practiced tithing as a cultural practice that was in place to maintain social etiquette and to align religious values with that of community values as well. These cultural practices included not only tithing, but also good moral values such as obedience, traditional gender roles, and embodying support of the community through prayer (Patterson 2023, 57).

As early as 1928, there was a concern among anthropologists to study the relationship of religion to other global structures of social and economic organization. In Franz Boas' *Anthropology and Modern Life* he states, "It is just as necessary to study economic life as dependent upon inventions, social structure, art, and religion as it is to study the reverse relations. . . . Social bonds and conflicts, concepts, emotional life, artistic activities are in their psychological and social origin only incompletely

redouble to economic factors" (Boas, 1928, p. ix). As many members of The Harmony Church are retired with fixed incomes, offerings are still abundant and keep the church functioning. While Pastor Nick does not threaten membership standings, he does emphasize that, at the very least, 10% of available income should go to tithing, and that members will be blessed in doing so. As the physical church is well maintained but older, extra donations from congregants are requested for updates and renovations. Pastor Nick and Jen recommend tithing in generosity and obedience to God, with Pastor Nick making his weekly contribution publicly as the offering plates make their way through the pews. His act of tithing is symbolic to the congregation that he is not just a leader or lecturer of the subject but a contributor as well. Tithing is seen as a fulfillment of not only earthly commands, but God's commands, as well. In this matter, communication and directional guidance are key factors of the church's success (Patterson 2023, 57-58).

This kind of directional guidance is central to American expressions of Christian faith. Oskar Gruenwald's "Phenomenology of Communications: Toward a Culture of Grace" explores this guidance in a way that is reflective of this community's reason for and conceptualization of religious practice. As scripture illustrates that God is a merciful being, Gruenwald suggests that this early introduction and continual look to God for guidance as a key for the believers, more specifically American Christian believers, in their faith walk (Patterson 2023, 60-61). Christians are always directed to pray, seek guidance from God regularly, let him know their concerns and requests, ask for forgiveness, and in turn, believers will be enlightened with direction and mercy. Gruenwald states, "In the end, America's destiny is a universal story, a hope-filled enduring odyssey, enabled by innumerable acts of kindness, despite all the violence and wretchedness, even lost wars, where erstwhile strangers become friends by discovering common ground—their essential humanity (Gruenwald, 2021, 17)."

## **Gender Roles**

I noted throughout my field research a presence of traditional gender roles. As pivotal as Pastor Nick was and continues to be to the ministry, it was Jen who was tasked with as much work, behind the scenes. Jen has an organizational role in the church. From organizing

regular weekly events, to the new updates and installations of the church, and so on, much of Jen's role is task oriented and involves a willingness to aid in setting up events as needed (Patterson 2023, 61-62). In Melody Maxwell's "A Winding and Widening Path: American Women's Roles in Twentieth-Century Baptist Life," she discusses similar traditional roles for women in the church. While restricted by conservative gender constraints, Maxwell states, "women served in a variety of volunteer roles in Baptist churches. . . . Baptist women typically took the lead in church hospitality and meal arrangements, nursery and children's work, and ministry to other women (Maxwell, 2018)." The emphasis here is on women doing volunteer work (Patterson 2023, 61-62). While Jen knows she is loved and appreciated by the congregation, the congregation might not know all the effort that she is putting in to being the support system for Pastor Nick and his services, as well as to the organizing tasks of the church.

On top of this work, Jen has a regular full-time job. As she is not the only woman of the church who works full-time, Jen is a symbolic representation of the resilience and tenacity of women who help to maintain the equilibrium of the church. While Jen directs and organizes events of the service, other women of the congregation help prepare meals in the fellowship hall and regularly volunteer to clean the church. I find all these traditional social and cultural norms to still be active within the church, and unquestioned. This is not necessarily a good or bad thing, just simply a circumstance in which there is compliance and contentment. In a world that is rapidly changing and pulling on what is encompassed in cultural gender normative practice, much of this congregation is holding on to their traditional normative practices, though there are currently not enough youth today to continue these practices in this congregation for the future (Patterson 2023, 62-63).

### **Local and Global Christian Cultures**

In cultural anthropology, tracing local–global connections is a must for understanding how people are compartmentalizing their practices and developing cross-cultural practices, along with what that means for cultures of the future. Arjun Appadurai suggests that "the intellectual infrastructure of anthropology, and of the culture concept itself, remains substantially shaped by the lens of pastness" (Appadurai 2013, 285). *What does culture mean to the circumstances now?* If

Christians want to continue to grow in the future in unity as a global social organization we must explore past and present cultural practices and relations and how they coexist. While there are several dynamics to what this entails, understanding religious practices across the globe are pivotal.

Locally, the congregation at The Harmony Church instills a notion of reliance and comfort in one another. Those outside the congregation might conclude that the church expresses only conformity and obligation to traditional practice (Patterson 2023, 64). But Appadurai describes in-group / out-group complexes and the force of culture, saying, "Some, usually anthropologists, have stressed the force of culture and the local understanding of a world that people are brought into as very young children and whose prejudices they quickly take to be part of ordinary life itself" (Appadurai 2013, 253). This force creates communities that can either confidentially coexist among those different in beliefs, practices, and moral judgements, or spread violence across communities that believe there are power battles to be won.

Appadurai references Emile Durkheim's conclusions about what and who God really was and is for society. He states, "For some great thinkers, like Emile Durkheim, God was just another name for the moral force of society, experienced as so powerful, abstract, and unquestionable by individuals that they projected it into the cosmos as the sacred" (Appadurai 2013, 253). Congregants of The Harmony Church reference God in various ways. Believers come to know God through leadership first, either through family or communal outreach. In cultivating the idea of seeking further knowledge, they then regularly attend church, where ministry implements God's scripture in a way that makes believers feel worthy of such a presence (Patterson 2023, 64-65). Members of the church call on God in prayer, during services, and experience physical symptoms of goosebumps and chills, further declaring his physical presence. There are unexplainable callings members express that guide their faith. I understand these to be their request for change or their embodiment of spiritual revitalization through worship. It is with new involvement of members and new development of activities that the congregation experiences renewal (Patterson 2023, 64-65).

## The Church in Theological Terms

To understand The Harmony Church in theological terms, I reviewed John Wesley's Wesleyan Quadrilateral: scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. These four aspects reflect the capability of human rationality and moral action to embody religious practice, the preface for which is usually a calling or burden placed on one's heart and mind. As mentioned in Don Thorsen's "Faith Integration, Higher Education, and the Wesleyan Quadrilateral: A Personal Witness," "Of course, the Christian understanding of faith is a complex reality to define, even from a biblical perspective. On the one hand, faith is somehow thought to be divinely initiated and enabled. On the other hand, people experience and grow in faith in ways that, humanly speaking, may be analyzed historically, theologically, behaviorally, and in other ways" (Thorsen, 2014). There is a danger in theology of overreliance on human reasoning and showcasing one's mental capacity to conceptualize. This departs from depending upon the omnipotent power of the Almighty God. It relies on human transcendence and rationality rather than God's all knowing, all-encompassing divine power. Humans begin to believe the power is theirs, and if they deem themselves capable of such power, the fate of humanity no longer lies in God's hands, but in the mortal disposition of fellow humans (Patterson 2023, 68-69). The Harmony Church congregation is obedient to scripture guidance and reflection, creating a devout awareness of dependence upon God through Jesus Christ. The devoutness that the members embody is not to be mistaken with human righteousness, but results in hospitality for those within and outside the congregation.

Since The Harmony Church is of the General Baptist denomination of Christianity, there are protocols that are to be followed to maintain the denominational connection. They follow the basic standards of religious practice which involves scriptural reference and reflection, weekly services, traditional hymns, prayer, and the practices of communion and baptisms. Within each of these practices comes the layering and personal employment of protocols for specific discussions and actions to allow for a cultivated reverence for faith (Patterson 2023, 69). Expressions of the religious practice that are of importance to the church are that of the Bible, communion juice and bread, playing music, and being demonstrative in rejoicing. Also important are visiting ones in the

hospital, having regular congregational dinners, and inviting speakers and musicians into the church. The purpose is to allow for growth of the community's knowledge of the church, as well as to entice the congregation to stay involved with the community and to engage in outreach of the Gospel (Patterson 2023, 65-66).

All this is reflected in the symbolism of the church, including in music and instruments, the Bible and scripture reflection, the act of prayer and vocalizing prayer, baptisms, dinners, and communion. The nuanced symbols of prayer bracelets and necklaces, personalized study Bibles, the admiration and recent implementation of the hanging of the Christian flag, and sanctuary imagery distinguish The Harmony Church as being concerned with revival and connection to God.

Exploring the reason for our earthly existence is regarded as important in Christianity, including eschatological avenues of interest that provide believers with the ability to face the unknown, along with circumstances out of their control. Knowing that there is peace and salvation after one is awarded graciousness and mercy through repentance is a pivotal aspect of Christian practice. The Harmony Church, through Pastor Nick's exercise of passion and devotion to scripture, calls on congregants to act now and save oneself from a tormented afterlife that will occur should believers not abide by what is commanded of them (Patterson 2023, 72-73). As Casey Barton discusses in "Preaching as Eschatology: Calling the Future into the Present," "First, the eschatological hope of many church members rests in the belief that Christ will come soon to rescue them from pain, discomfort, and cultural battles that they themselves and the church as a whole currently face. . . . Second, preaching about eschatology is largely absent or locates God in some time other than now, through casting eschatology as exclusively future, primarily past, or outside of time through allegorization" (Barton 2022, 18). This theology purports that time is of the essence and believers are closer to their salvation with each new day than when they first began (Romans 13). The Harmony Church emphasizes the importance of time in the time spent together in services, studying scripture, and in prayer. There is guidance in the right way to use one's time to ensure not only are they saved, but their loved ones and fellow believers as well (Patterson 2023, 73).

Though eschatological theological discussion is an important cornerstone in Christian doctrine, it is often

left up to interpretation in the eyes of believers. In fact, the discussion of eschatology is largely disregarded in today's studies (Patterson 2023, 73). As a result there is the potential for diverse ideologies regarding what life entails after death. Barton notes, "For eschatology in the realm of biblical interpretation, an increasing anti-supernatural conviction, and nontheistic approaches to the text in many ways, neutralized traditional interpretations of biblical texts of eschatological importance" (Barton 2022, 20). In this action of questioning and potentially disregarding eschatological knowledge, Christianity's ability to justify the unexplainable suffers. Eschatology applies reasoning to theological convictions. It helps to justify the seemingly mythological worldview of being guided by a higher power that is presumably in the cosmos. Pastor Nick rarely discusses the imagery of life after death for believers or non-believers. But he implies regularly that it is with obedience, call to action, baptism, and exclamation of the Lord in one's life that they will receive the opportunity of salvation on their day of judgment (Patterson 2023, 73-74).

Though it might seem difficult, the call to obedience is an opportunity to personally prosper by acting as Jesus' would have in similar circumstances, as well as stretching the power prayer has in changing the mindsets and considerations of those opposing Christian practice (Patterson 2023, 75-76). Knowing that one can rely on a fellowship in which the community considers prayer requests outside that of their own implies that not only are they encouragers of one another, but encouragers of the faith as well. Prayer in fellowship involves an emphasis on caring for one another as God has cared for His followers. On the whole, there is appreciation and unity in services and a call to continually rise above life's circumstances and take the next steps toward a closer relationship with God through Jesus Christ (Patterson 2023, 76).

## **Conclusion**

The Harmony Church is a cog in the machine of modernization and the process of globalization, but also a link to Christian tradition and the historic global church. The church's humble beginning brought this small midwestern community together in celebration of their reason of existence, though some might say it was for a good meal or a home away from home. Reflecting on my experience, the events of The Harmony Church allowed me to become fully immersed in what it means to practice and participate

in a religion. It is through repetitive prayer, scriptural guidance, group discussions, musical rejoicing, and communion that the traditions of Christianity flourish. With the aim of the religion being that of bringing all people to salvation, Pastor Nick reiterates that there are requirements for the believer, such as tithing regularly, repenting of one's old ways, and becoming baptized in front of the congregation to have a relationship with God so certain that on Judgment Day they will know their fate to be in eternity with God. This demonstrates that Pastor Nick is a leader of the congregation in a way similar to that of Jesus in his time spent on earth, with his determination to bring as many followers as possible to God.

The modernized world is full of distractions that are pulling people away from the church setting, leaving believers to be concerned that this is "the end of the church era." As the world is seen to be in chaos, the congregation calls this moment "the time before the second coming of Christ." These discussions may make Christians seem unrealistic in a world that understands seeing as believing. But their concerns are justified when it comes to the ideologies of Christian scripture and living in the real world as a Christian believer. There are moral convictions that are active in the basic decisions believers make each day, and these reflect within the community mindset and justify how members coexist with fellow believers of other denominations and with the community (Patterson 2023, 83-85).

In conclusion, I have utilized the ethnographic research methods of observation, participation, and interviews to enable me to retrieve the qualitative data discussed in this study to understand the concerns of this rural church's understanding and embodiment of Christian practice, and to further relate their practice to the global ideologies and practices of the religion. In doing so I have come to learn that religion is a part of culture through which people make sense of their time here on earth, and rely heavily on its enactment in the community to provide them with hope and faith in their spiritual future in the afterlife. It is a manifestation of the undoubtable fact that Christ has and continues to play a pivotal role in rural and global Christian practice (Patterson 2023, 83-85).

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