

**A NON-HETERONORMATIVE CHRISTIANITY? THE POLITICS OF SPACE AND
AMBIGUITIES OF COMMUNITY AT OUR HOPE METROPOLITAN COMMUNITY
CHURCH IN ATHENS, GEORGIA**

by

AMANDA LYNN MAYS

(Under the Direction of Amy J. Ross)

ABSTRACT

Despite the breadth of scholarship in the area of social justice in Human Geography, research on the politics of sexual identity needs greater attention, specifically where Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgender and Queer people have suffered religious persecution. Over the summer of 2009 I conducted research addressing the intersection of sexuality and Christianity at Our Hope Metropolitan Community Church in Athens, GA. Employing the epistemologies of Queer theory and Critical Geography, I used ethnographic methods to find that although LGBTQ affirming churches did provide benefits to the LGBTQ community, issues of racism and heteronormativity remained to be solved.

INDEX WORDS: Sexuality, Christianity, LGBTQ, queer, identity, diversity and community

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of the Requirements for the Degree

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May 2010

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to all those women in history whose names have never been recorded in genealogical records. I also dedicate this work to all those people who have suffered religious oppression in any way, and to children who will grow up in a socially constructed world and one day have to decide their own perspectives. Lastly, I dedicate this work to critical thought.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Amy Ross, my major advisor, for teaching me how to look at things differently even when I thought I had exhausted the discovery of *all* possible perspectives on issues that came up throughout the research process. I would also like to thank Amy for allowing me space to vent my frustrations throughout the research and encouraging me to “write on!”, and for her invaluable support and personal encouragement throughout my time in the Geography masters program. I would like to thank Bethany Moreton and Amy Trauger, my other committee members, for supporting this project by meeting with me whenever I needed to discuss something, providing literature that was vital to my research, and offering constructive criticism and encouraging remarks throughout the process of my research. Katherine Hankins also deserves appreciation as an undergraduate mentor, who informed me when I was at a cross-road, that geography could be my “art”. A few years later, I am finally beginning to understand. In addition, I thank my friends, Megan Freeman and Michele Flippo-Bolduc, for reminding me to breathe and dancing with me through the maze of graduate school from beginning to end. I thank my dad for teaching me how to write a paragraph (something I am still perfecting) and calling me “Amazon Woman” throughout my childhood and I thank my brother, John Mays for inspiring a lifestyle of social justice activism. Last but not least, I thank Matt Ross for his love and support during a few of the most chaotic, yet rewarding, months of my life and listening when I rehearsed the intensity of dreams I had involving the details of this thesis.

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CH. 1 INTRODUCTION

*Religion in general still presents the greatest obstacles we face in full equality...ninety five percent of the oppression we face comes from the religious community.*¹

Gene Robinson, clergy member and gay rights activist.

*Social science research and theorizing about sexuality and religion is sparse.*²

Darren Sherkat

Around the world, local, national and international societies are familiar with the experience of oppression based on sexual orientation. By the year 2009, eighty countries sponsored homophobic laws including seventy two countries worldwide that imprisoned consenting adults and five countries that prosecuted non-heterosexual acts with the death penalty.³ In the United States, thirty states have passed constitutional amendments or laws explicitly banning same sex marriage⁴, and in the state of Georgia, homophobic legislation is threatening education by attempting to remove sexuality studies from university curriculums (Downy 2009; Moreton 2009).

In the world, the United States and the State of Georgia, religion is used as justification to suppress people based on their sexuality, and people and organizations fight back, challenging the social injustices that individuals, organizations and governments carry out. One organization in particular, Our Hope Metropolitan Community Church, does just that.

¹ "Clergy gather in DC to lobby for gay rights", Chicago Tribune, May 4, 2009.

² (Sherkat 2002, p.314)

³ The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex Association. "2009 Report on State Sponsored Homophobia." (<http://ilga.org>).

⁴ Change.org, "A Few Statistics on LGBTQ Issues.", 2008, (<http://gayrights.change.org>).

Our Hope Metropolitan Community Church is a Christian organization that works to fight the oppression of people who identify as lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender and queer, particularly, the oppression of religiously justified homophobia.

Religiously justified arguments about what constitutes moral sexuality exemplify attempts to rationalize the control of sexuality, as can be seen;

The deployment of sexuality...engenders a continual extension of areas and forms of control. The deployment of sexuality has its reason for being, not in reproducing itself, but in proliferating, innovating, annexing, creating, and penetrating bodies in an increasingly detailed way, and in controlling populations in an increasingly comprehensive way (Foucault 1979, p.107).

Our Hope Metropolitan Community Church disrupts the imposition of religious control over what counts as moral sexuality and because of this I chose this church as the site of my research.

The goal of my study was to analyze the role of religion in addressing, problematizing and affirming human sexuality. In order to analyze the multiple relationships between religion and sexuality, I conducted three months of ethnographic research at Our Hope Metropolitan Community Church in Athens, Georgia.⁵

1.1 Research Questions

*Issues of sexuality have fostered considerable questioning, controversy, and even reimagining of the nature of religion.*⁶

The focus for my project was to understand how Our Hope, a Christian church influenced the lives of its members, particularly people identifying as lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender and/or queer.⁷ My first question follows: How does Our Hope serve the Athens LGBTQ community? If there are benefits to attending, what are they, and if there are not,

⁵ Our Hope Metropolitan Community Church will be referred to as “Our Hope” throughout the remainder of this thesis.

⁶ (Sherkat 2002, p.314).

⁷ Throughout this thesis, “LGBTQ” will be used to represent people identifying as lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender and queer.

why?⁸ The research also included an investigation of the spatial relationship between Our Hope and the Presbyterian Student Center where Our Hope conducted its church services and meetings. To inquire about the politics between the shared uses of space, my second question follows: *What are the primary benefits of Our Hope MCC being located inside another church, i.e. the Presbyterian Student Center?*

In order to answer these questions, I began investigating intersections of religion and sexuality at Our Hope in March 2009. At that time, which was three months before starting participant observation, I watched documentaries with personal interviews about how Christianity affected individuals' sexualities.⁹ I also reviewed websites linked on the UGA LGBT center's website to gain a better understanding of activism against religious homophobia. Lastly, I had conversations with two friends who had previously attending Our Hope and were able to tell me about their experiences there. Three months later in March, I began communication with BETH¹⁰, the Reverend of the church. I spoke with BETH on June 4, 2009 about conducting research at Our Hope. Introducing myself and the project, I wrote to BETH:

My name is Amanda Mays. I am a queer graduate student at UGA studying sexuality and Christianity. I am in the final stages of finishing up my master's degree and would like to come to your church to better understand Our Hope's message of living a Christian lifestyle. My research on Christianity and sexuality stems from personal experience attending a homophobic church in Northwest Georgia for most of my childhood and teenage years. I was only able to stop attending by leaving my family's house and moving to Athens where I've been now for almost six years...

⁸ In this study, benefits to the LGBTQ community are characterized as those aspects of attending Our Hope which were advantageous to the LGBTQ community including affirmation, belonging and a place to worship where one could express their sexuality with a same-sex partner and not be persecuted for doing so.

⁹ Movies and documentaries included *Religulous* (2008), *Jesus Camp* (2006), *Save Me* (2007) and *Call Me Troy* (2007).

¹⁰ Pseudonyms are used throughout this project to protect the anonymity of individual participants.

I would like to start attending Sunday services this upcoming Sunday, June 7th. Recently I have been reading about the Metropolitan Community Church, as it is international, its origin in California and Athens' Our Hope's online sermons which I greatly enjoy. Granted, this is very short notice, but if you have a spare minute before Sunday I would like to meet in person to discuss my project in greater detail. I will come to wherever you would like to meet.

Through establishing my positionality, I felt explaining myself would help her understand that I was not there to join the church, rather to conduct research. I also added the reading I had been doing on the larger international Metropolitan Community Churches to show that I was indeed interested in studying the church. From the outset, however, I became skeptical of attempts to convert me based on my own past experiences where for ten years of my youth I attended a Christian church that taught it was the duty of a Christian to convert other “non-Christians”. To add to my already established anxieties about possible attempts at converting me, I had read Tanya Erzen’s book, *Straight to Jesus: Sexual and Christian Conversions in the Ex-Gay Movement* (2006), where members of the church she was researching attempted to convert her. Describing her experience, Erzen states, "They incorporated my research agenda into their own world-view and through the idea that it was part of a divine scheme, and they had faith that God was directing the course of my research. Implicit within my acceptance by the New Hope leadership team was their belief that I, too, had the potential for conversion to a Christian life” (Erzen 2006, p.6). To my first e-mail, BETH replied:

Hello Amanda:

Yes...by all means come join us at Our Hope MCC! It is a wonderful church & one I think you will appreciate. I am more than willing to meet with you; however, I am away until June 14--working on 2 classes to finish up my course work for a Doctor of Ministries degree from EDS (Episcopal Divinity School). I WILL be in worship on Sunday, June 21, but will not be preaching. However, Rev. Carolyn Mobley one of MCC's finest African American clergy will be leading us in worship on that Sunday. This coming Sunday, June 7th, Michael Harris, former Lutheran minister will be preaching...

...I do encourage you to join us THIS Sunday...& then we'll (you & I) can touch base on the 14th. We can briefly on that day OR schedule something for later that week....We'll look forward to meeting you in person & having you join us at Our Hope. See you on the 14th!

Peace,
Pastor [BETH]

I began participant observation on June 14, 2009, and between that day and August 23, I attended nine Sunday sermons during which time I took field notes. In that period of time I also went out to eat with members of Our Hope after services and presented my research at Our Hope's "bi-annual board meeting".¹¹ In addition to these activities I held a semi-structured focus group from July 22 to August 19, 2009. The focus group met weekly, usually on Wednesday nights at the church. Lastly, I participated in a three day set of events for Our Hope's tenth anniversary celebration in late August after which I concluded participant observation. My last day attending Our Hope was August 23; however I maintained communication with members of Our Hope, via e-mail correspondence, through March, 2010.

Throughout the research period, I found that Our Hope influenced the lives of people who attended through providing a safe space to meet. The LGBTQ community that attended also benefited by participating the resignification of Christianity, which enabled members to hold steadfast to their identities and Christian beliefs at the same time. Additionally I found the spatial relationship between Our Hope and the church it rented space from, the Presbyterian Student Center, to be one of conflict because Our Hope was not allowed to establish itself inside the space. Lastly, I found that although Our Hope was promoted as a community, certain events at the church contradicted the concept of community.

¹¹ July 22, 2009.

This thesis began with an explanation of Our Hope, the local church I chose to attend, conducting ethnographic research on relationships between Christianity and sexuality. In Chapter two I will discuss the larger context within which Our Hope exists. Our Hope was a ten year old chapter of a much larger international body of Metropolitan Community Churches which started 41 years ago. I will also discuss why I chose the site of my research. Chapter three will provide the theoretical framework that informed my research from my initial investigation through the culmination of participant observation. Chapter four will follow with an explanation of the methodology I employed while conducting research for this project. I will discuss multiple methods of data collection including participant observation, text analysis, semi-structured interviews and a semi-structured focus group. I will discuss the findings of my research throughout Chapter five, including politics of space and equal access to space, the concept of community and paradoxical elements at the site including racial segregation and heteronormativity. In conclusion, I will review the project and discuss areas of inquiry that deserve future scholarly attention.

CH.2 BACKGROUND OF THE METROPOLITAN COMMUNITY CHURCHES

The International Metropolitan Community Church began in the United States in 1968, a year before New York's Stonewall Riots. A group of 12 people met in Reverend Troy Perry's living room in Huntington Park, California on October 6th of that year. Reverend Perry, defrocked as a clergyperson by a Pentecostal denomination because of his homosexuality, later became the first Reverend of the Metropolitan Community Church which met in Los Angeles, CA. Since 1968, the Metropolitan Community Church has grown into an international organization, having around 300 congregations in 22 countries (Figure 1).

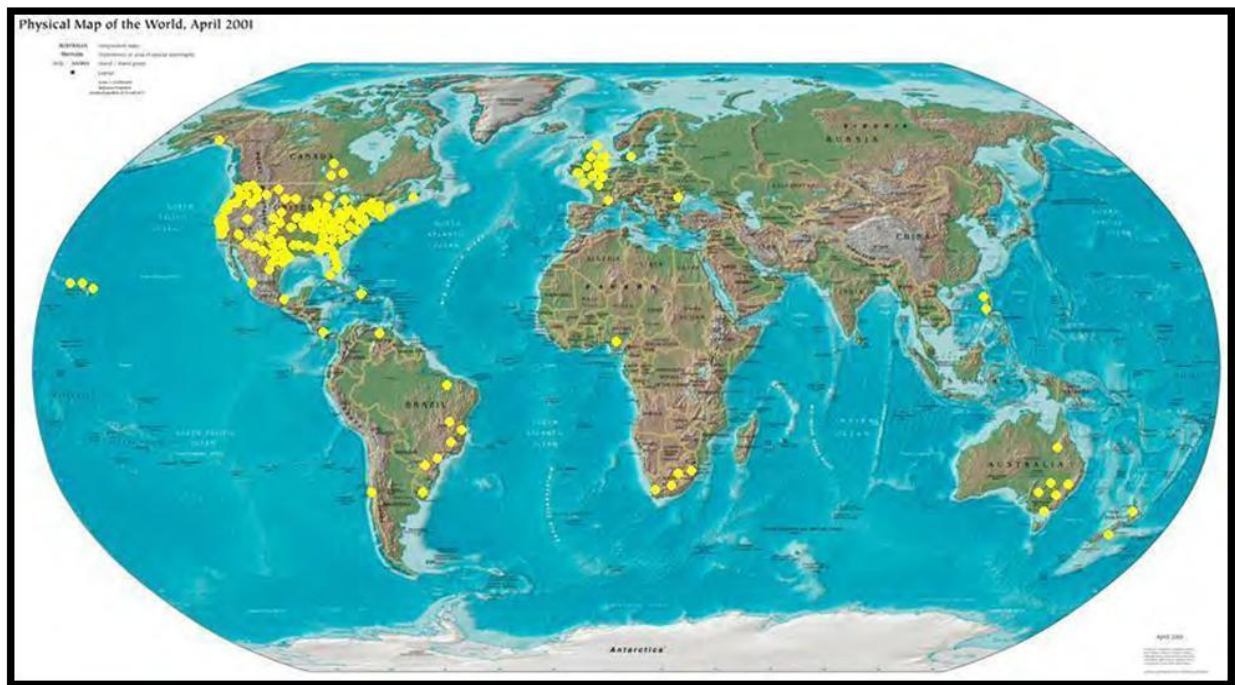


Figure 1: International Metropolitan Community Churches.

The primary message of the church is that it accepts people who identify as part of the LGBTQ community: “Our Hope plays a vital role in addressing the spiritual needs of all people, but especially the lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender and straight-but-not-narrow community.”¹² In addition to reading literature on the history of the MCC, I had the opportunity to attend an event during which BETH introduced the founder of the international organization of churches, Reverend Troy Perry. On August 22, 2009 at the Magnolia Ballroom on the UGA campus, BETH introduced Reverend Perry, describing his role in the 1968 formation of the church:

We are honored to have Troy Perry, pastor and prophet. Life is a journey, we are all on our separate paths which weave and wind together. We would be lost without luminaries along the way. Troy has been one not only in what he’s said, but simply because who he is. Troy gave hope, light and life and we thank god for him, and all that he has meant to those that have known and loved him.¹³

Going further, BETH added the steps that led to Perry’s founding of the MCC:

A little about Troy’s life- his life has been devoted to helping others discover the loving and caring god to whom he has committed his entire life. As founder of the predominately g- l- b- t metropolitan communities churches, ...in making the decision to come to terms with his spirituality and sexual orientation, and as he began to start [the international Metropolitan Community Church] in October of 1968, Troy is quoted [in his book] as saying, ‘The lord is dealing with me. My previous church taught that you couldn’t be both Christian and gay then one day it was as though a thought came to me and god said, ‘Troy don’t tell me what I can do- I love you Troy. I don’t have step sons and step daughters. Re-read the word, and re-read god’s word I did’.¹⁴

In concluding her introduction of Perry, BETH provided a connection between the past and the present:

Troy’s advice was sound advice in 1968 it is just as sound advice in 2009....in addition to his work as a gay religious leader and human rights activist, the Reverend Perry has authored an autobiography entitled ‘The Lord is My Shepherd

¹² www.ourhopemcc.com

¹³ August 23, 2009.

¹⁴ (Ibid.)

and He Knows I am Gay'. He is [also] the subject of another book entitled, 'Our God Too'...

It is one of the highlights of my life to share with you the giant who walks among us who has built a bridge that every one of us has walked over, and on whose shoulders we stand, the Revered Elder Troy Perry.¹⁵

As can be seen in BETH'S introduction of Perry, the founder of the MCC, much emphasis is placed Perry's personal history as a gay Christian man who had to "come to terms with his sexuality" promoting the church as one which encourages people to come to terms with *their* sexuality. In addition to discussing Perry's sexuality, the larger more popular recognition of Perry's history is brought to attention by discussing that someone has written a book about him. Lastly, in this introduction a metaphor is made to Perry as a "giant", who walks among us...on whose shoulders we stand. In implying that Perry has strength and size superior to that of a human, he is made out to be someone who deserves attention and reverence.

The MCC does not claim to be of one denomination. Reverends in each church come from different educational and religious backgrounds. In discussing the beginning stages of how the MCC would use religious materials, the founder, Perry states, "We utilized the books of worship from the Episcopal, Presbyterian and Lutheran churches as well as those that members of the congregation wanted considered. We experimented and we accommodated. It may sound like a hodgepodge, but what emerged was a straight line of well-organized ritual that allows for improvisation or change should any occasion within the church warrant it."¹⁶

The MCC utilizes bylaws establishing governance which it applies to each individual branch of the MCC, including Our Hope in Athens, GA. In the bylaws there are clergy and lay people or those not of the clergy. The *Ministry of the Laity* includes *The Priesthood of All Believers and deacons*. As stated in lines 124-131 of the bylaws, "THE PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS [are] Lay people [who] are

¹⁵ (Ibid.)

¹⁶ (Ibid.)

the People of God, called by God and authorized by Scripture to respond to the Word, serving as Christ served, to the end that the Church may be edified and the world transformed. UFMCC affirms that this is the ministry of every lay person in the UFMCC”. At Our Hope the laity were church members but also acted as deacons. The MCC defines the role of the deacon in lines 131-132 of the bylaws; “DEACONS: As outlined in the New Testament, their office is an historic ministry of service and aid within the Christian Church.”¹⁷

In contrast to the lay people that make up the congregation, the bylaws also define the role of the clergy in lines 133-150, where, “the Ministry of the Clergy are members of the People of God, called by God, authorized and legally recognized by the UFMCC to serve among the people as professional ministers of the Word and Sacraments”. Additionally,

In accordance with their call, clergy shall administer the Rites and Sacraments of the UFMCC and be teachers and preachers of the faith to the end that the world may believe and the Church might be renewed, equipped, and strengthened in its ministry. Clergy are those persons of professed and demonstrated call to be professional Christian ministers who meet the qualifications established by the Board of Elders who have met the academic standards and qualifications as established by the Board of Elders may then be ordained. A person who is ordained cannot function as a UFMCC clergy person until he/she is licensed.¹⁸

Reverend BETH was finishing her doctorate of divinity over the summer of 2009 in order to become ordained.

2.1 The Local Site: Our Hope Metropolitan Community Church

Our Hope is a local branch of the larger international Metropolitan Community Churches. Our Hope is located at 1250 South Lumpkin Street in Athens, Georgia between the “five-points” neighborhood area and the UGA campus (See Figure 2).

¹⁷ MCC *Bylaws*

¹⁸ (Ibid., 2010)

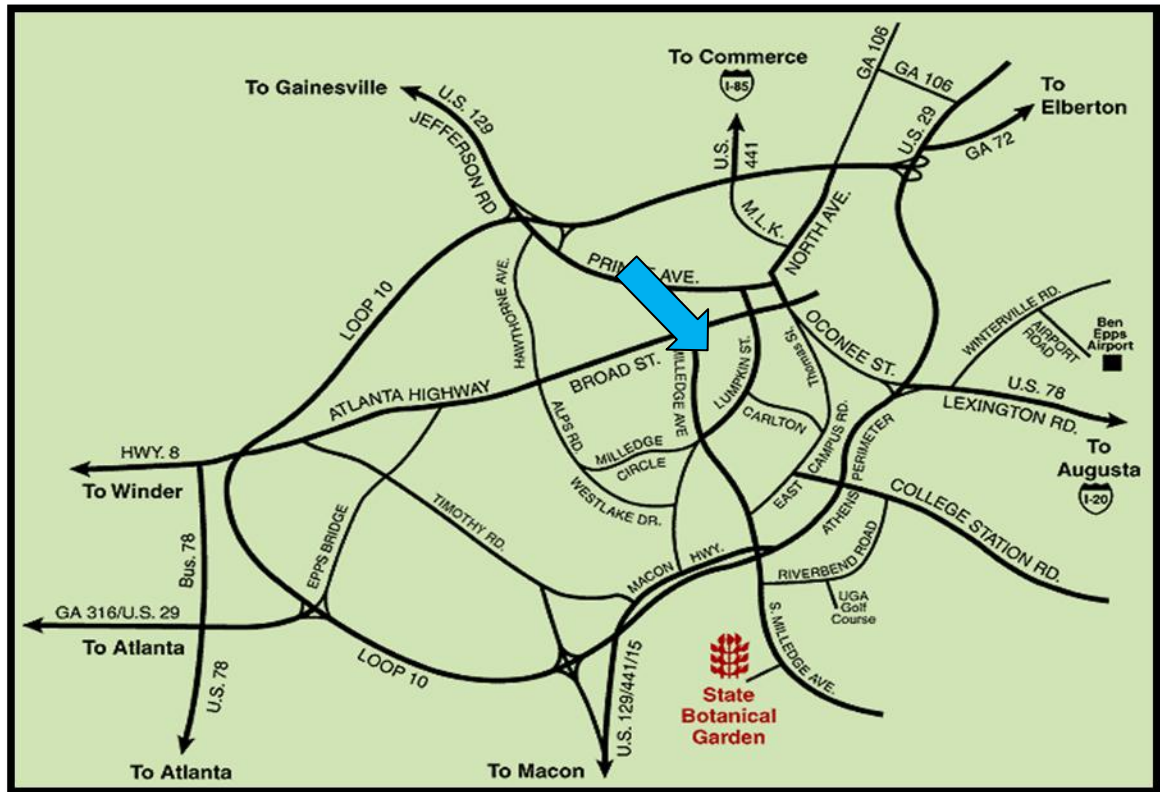


Figure 2: Our Hope Metropolitan Community Church.

I would not have known the Metropolitan Community church existed if my co-worker had not mentioned it in the conversation that initiated my interest in the site. This is because Our Hope is not very noticeable at its location. Traveling Lumpkin Street there is no sign in front of the church indicating that it exists, except during the hours of church services on Sundays. In fact, the church as an organization has no permanent indicator of their occupation of space on Lumpkin Street. This was mentioned as a problem by church members who participated in the weekly focus group between July and August and will be mentioned later in the discussion of this study. Our Hope's church sign was much smaller than the sign of the Presbyterian Student Center's sign (See Figure 3).



Figure 3: Our Hope Metropolitan Community Church street sign.

Our Hope Metropolitan Community Church is internally described as, “An active congregation within the international fellowship of Metropolitan Community Church. Like all MCC churches around the world, Our Hope plays a vital role in addressing the spiritual needs of all people, but especially the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and ‘straight-but-not-narrow’ community.”¹⁹

In understanding where Our Hope fit within the broader context of Christianity it was difficult to describe the church other than it being “non-denominational.”²⁰

¹⁹ (www.ourhopemcc.com)

²⁰ (Ibid., 2010)

However, in a sermon, BETH referred to the church as a progressive Christian church. BETH described Our Hope, remarking to the congregation, “I remind you that each of us has something to offer into the future as progressive Christians²¹ who are committed to God’s call in [and] on our lives.”

Choosing the Site

I chose to look at sexuality in the church because I first experienced homophobia in a church setting. The knowledge of the church’s oppression of sexuality I accumulated over a period of 15 years as a young church member stimulated my interest in this research. I also wanted to document the voices of people who had experienced church homophobia. I chose to do my research at Our Hope because the church openly affirmed GLBT identities. As stated, “More than any other community, members of the MCC have brought their particular life experiences to bear on reading and interpreting scripture in liberating ways for GLBT people...all are welcomed and our service to those who are excluded is a primary calling. We will be leaders in the world about the union of spirituality and sexuality by articulating our message and spreading it effectively.”²²

In addition to the affirmation of non-heterosexual identities, I chose Our Hope because I expected to be granted insider access. Because of my positionality as a queer identified person and Our Hope’s publicity as an LGBTQ accepting church, I expected that I would easily accepted into the church congregation as a queer researcher. I also took into consideration my role as member of the queer network in Athens, which is very cohesive and supporting of people who are LGBTQ identified.

²¹ Sermon June 28, 2009

²² “Perspectives on Spiritual Transformation”, pamphlet, Our Hope Metropolitan Community Church, 2005.

In addition, it is suggested that researchers studying a group they are a part of have an advantage because they are able to use their knowledge of the group as insight (Mullings 1999).

In addition to identifying as Queer, I also related to the group I would be studying in that I attended a Christian church for over ten years in my youth, identifying as a Christian for all those years. Although now I do not identify as Christian, I look back on that time, nine years ago, and see that in the least, I was pretty good at going to church! In fact I was so involved with my church that I attempted to “convert” my friends to Christianity which I often failed at, experiencing rejection that I dealt with by only going to church more. With my extensive experience going to church when I was younger, I felt going into my research, that I had a basic understanding of the format of church services as well as levels of hierarchy within the church. Regarding the Sunday church service, which I would attend over the coming summer, I also expected to have to sing songs from a hymnal, be offered what I knew as the “lord’s supper” which Our Hope MCC called the “Sacrament”, and to be seated with a group of people all facing the same direction in a single room where a preacher or Reverend would present a sermon on whatever they deemed necessary to teach that Sunday. In the end, most of my expectations of the basic structure of the church services were correct.

Although I had anticipated the professional outcomes of this research, I had not anticipated one benefit this study would have on me personally. As I spent more time at the church, taking field notes, interviewing members, and at times simply observing without writing anything down, I became increasingly aware of my position as a researcher, rather than church member. As I learned the concept of “church of origin” from participants, I discovered that I too had a church of origin and that in conceptualizing past oppressive church experiences as separate from the now, there grew the opportunity to come to terms with that past experience.

Because I was a queer person having identified as a Christian in the past, I anticipated the ability to easily build researcher-participant relationships at Our Hope. Regarding my orientation as a queer person, I expected to be granted acceptance from Our Hope which would enable my role as a researcher being less intrusive. I planned that my knowledge of church functions and shared experience of having dealt with social oppression based on my sexuality would be more of a link that would facilitate my participation at Our Hope. Expectations that my sexuality would provide a link to participants came through reading Our Hope's online sermon transcripts before attending the church for participant observation which encouraged diversity of sexual orientation among the church's membership.

Furthermore, I expected Our Hope's acceptance based on an earlier experience having attended the Unitarian Universalist Church in Athens. Like Our Hope, the Unitarian Universalist church encouraged LGBTQ people to come:

Unitarian Universalists are dedicated to living our faith and practicing what we preach. Working for civil rights and combating oppression are essential parts of our spiritual journey. Our faith community has worked for justice for hundreds of years; from advocating for free speech and the free practice of religion as far back as the fifteen hundreds...we continue to work for justice today in ways that resonate with our principles...standing up for the full rights of bi-sexual, gay, lesbian and transgender people."²³

Upon my first visit to what is referred to as "the UU church" I received an overwhelming acceptance as I entered with my girlfriend. An acceptance I had not received at other churches. We were greeted with smiles, people shifted their seating arrangements so that we would have a place to sit, and those people sitting to the left and right of us warmly introduced themselves and treated us as if we had been attending the church for years. While the Unitarian Universalist Church of Athens, GA did spark my interest in studying sexuality in churches, I chose not to do research at this church because of the location being too far from my apartment to get to without

²³ <http://www.uua.org>

the city bus service on Sundays, but more significantly, the Unitarian Universalist Church was widely known in Athens in contrast to the Metropolitan Community Church which had a congregation much smaller and no street sign or public advertisement. Because Our Hope MCC was smaller and without so much recognition, I thought it would be in the best interest of my scholarship to do research here, ethnography in particular. This is because not only did Our Hope MCC support the LGBT community as did the Unitarian Universalist Church, it was formed at the beginning of the gay rights movement on the east and west coasts of the U.S., by a gay man who stated the church's goal was to serve the gay Christian population for having been rejected by other churches because of their sexuality.

Our Hope was more easily accessible than the Unitarian Universalist Church, as stated above. Our Hope was within walking distance of my apartment, one mile southeast of where I lived. Because I did not own a vehicle and the city bus system, Athens Transit, did not operate on Sundays which was the day I would be attending church services, the site of my research was limited to an area I could access by walking or riding my bike.²⁴

Having never been to a Metropolitan Community Church I was very interested in the organization's construction of ethics and meanings regarding sexuality. I was interested in Our Hope because of the church's public affirmation of LGBTQ identities so much that it is commonly referred to as "the gay church", as told by a co-worker who was also a church member. My co-worker had suggested that most people knew the church as the "gay" church and wondered why I had never heard of it. I expected that Our Hope's approach to sexuality would differ quite substantially from the meanings constructed by the church I grew up in which was Oak Hill Church of Christ in Rome, GA.

²⁴ Over the summer I usually biked to Our Hope, however a neighbor drove me on the occasion inclement weather.

CH.3 LITERATURE REVIEW

I found queer theory to provide the most comprehensive explanation of sexual identity with regard to explanations of various subjective experiences in regarding sexuality and identity. Although I was interested in studying Our Hope, an LGBTQ affirming Christian church²⁵, the knowledge I had of Christianity came from the homophobic Christian church I had been raised in. With an awareness of my positionality going into this project, attempting to *un-learn* the homophobic Christianity I knew was vitally necessary to myself as a researcher who would be critically evaluating this Christian organization. Although it is impossible to maintain a completely un-biased perspective as a researcher, reading the literature of Queer Theory and Critical Geography provided insight to intersections of religion and sexuality that I had not previously experienced or had knowledge of.

As I read more queer theory I noticed that not many Geographers were writing in that field, although there was an area in Geography which addressed similar issues: Critical Geography. I was introduced to Critical Geography at a meeting with Dr. Jeremy Crampton at Georgia State University when visiting their Geography Department in 2007. On the wall in Dr. Crampton's office there was an "Upside-Down" map of the world. Seeing this map immediately changed my perspective of placement and suggested that what were fixed categories could be transgressed and labels were really fluid and changeable based on one's subjective experience of the world. Reading further into Queer Theory I realized that I needed to include literature from the field of Critical Geography.

²⁵ www.ourhopemcc.com

Critical Geography was useful to my project by providing a Geographical lens through which fixed categories of identity, including not only sexuality but also seemingly fixed categories of religion, could be seen from multiple perspectives. I began the research for this project utilizing the epistemologies of Queer Theory and Critical Geography, however further into participant observation I added literature that dealt with aspects of religion. I also read portions of the Bible to better understand church sermons at Our Hope that I attended. This literature provided a better understanding of Christianity and the concepts and terminology of participants' discourses.

In this study Queer theory provided an understanding of the social construction of sexuality as well as the normalization and privileging heterosexuality. "Queer" is used in this study in multiple ways. Regarding identity, "queer" is used to identify sexual orientation; however "queer" also describes an epistemology which brings attention to marginalized groups of people. In "Faith Based Queer Space in Washington D.C.", Paris and Anderson used queer theory in their study of an MCC in Washington, D.C. In their discussion of "new dimensions of queer theory" they suggest, "queer theory highlights discourse on persons, things and related concepts whose sexual desires or gender identity do not conform to socioculturally structured norms" (Paris and Anderson 2001, p.p.151-152). Additionally queer scholarship explores place-making using race, class, gender and sexuality as important facets. Lastly, advances in current queer research are discussed:

Scholars who mention faith and religion often mention the negative impact of theologies and churches that define homosexuality as a sin. A more common topic is religion and identity, the ways in which queers integrate faith and sexuality as individuals. Most studies about religion and sexuality however focus on the morality or immorality of queer sexualities and more recently the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of religious reparative therapies (Ibid 2001, p.152).

In *The History of Sexuality* (1978), Foucault informs us of the origins of sexuality as a concept, beginning with the entrance of sexuality into discourse for the purpose of confessing sins in the Christian church in the seventeenth century. Discourse on sexuality was mandated, as stated, “this obligation was decreed, as an ideal at least, for every good Christian” (Foucault 1978, p.26). Furthermore, goes on to suggest that the Christian pastoral “prescribed as a fundamental duty the task of passing everything having to do with sex through the endless mills of speech...ways of rendering [sexuality] morally acceptable” (Ibid., p.21). The ability of the church to render certain sexualities morally acceptable can be seen as a form of power; “power is everywhere, not because it embraces everything but because it comes from everywhere (Ibid.), The ability to use power for resistance is demonstrated in the statement, “power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate...as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them” (Ibid, p.92). Foucault’s analysis led me to question the power of Christian ideologies when these ideologies influence sexual identity.

An understanding of identity was necessary when going into this study. In *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (Butler 1997), Judith Butler discusses the agency of discourse to resignify meaning with regard to identity. Butler’s argument for the agency of speech, illustrated by the resignification of the once derogatory term “queer”, can also be observed in the resignification of what is normal regarding Christian sexuality. In agreement with Foucault’s illustration of power being used to challenge homophobia, Butler suggests that “subordination by power is essential to agency” (Butler 1990). Thus through reiterating the message that Christianity includes LGBTQ sexualities, Our Hope uses agency to rework the meaning of Christian sexualities.

Because sexuality is affected by boundaries of normalcy, it was imperative that queer theory be applied to my study. On the critical exploration of sexuality norms, Kath Browne (2006) discusses tensions between geographies of sexuality and queer geographies, specifically the problematic construction of identity limitations. Browne argues that geographies of sexuality fail to critically address normative boundaries of sexuality and fixed assumptions of sex. Additionally, as geographies of sexuality reproduce normative hetero/homosexualities, queer theory enables “rethinking, redrawing, remapping and reconceptualizing space” (Browne 2006, p.888). Browne defines queer as defying boundaries and control while continually seeking critical exploration, suggesting that explicit answers or dichotomous definitions are the antithesis of what queer is.

In addition, Tanya Erzen’s work, *Straight to Jesus: Sexual and Christian Conversions in the Ex-Gay Movement* (2006), discussed gay Christians’ attempts to change their identities from gay to straight although some members of the study could not force changes in their identity, discovering that it was not possible to fulfill the conversion attempts of the homophobic organization that suggested it was necessary to be heterosexual to be a Christian. In addition to the information of Butler and Wright, this led me to question the permanence of self-identification and what influences resignification might have in Christianity.

Suggesting the need for more critical perspectives on fixed identities, Binnie and Valentine challenge the hegemonic ideals of gay and lesbian geographies in *Geographies of Sexuality- a Review in Progress* (Binnie and Valentine 1999). Binnie and Valentine bring awareness to the lack of recognition of identities falling outside identity boundaries, such as bisexual and trans-gender identities. As the international MCC says, “It is time we bring

philosophical and rational thought—especially what the sciences have told us about sexual orientation and identity development—into conversation with the Bible.”²⁶

Not only does Binnie and Valentine’s thesis suggest as the international MCC does, that identity and sexual orientation are significant factors effecting society and human relations, the international MCC speaks, in part giving validity to Binnie and Valentines argument, that identities falling outside the norm of heterosexuality be legitimated; as stated “It is time we listen to the experiences of God’s gay and lesbian children who know with all their hearts that God has created them just as they are.”²⁷ Additionally, the authors comment on queer geographies noting that although queer geographies are inclusive of said transgressions between categories of gender and sexuality, there is a lack of awareness of racism and disability within the field.

In *Marginality and the Landscapes of Erotic Alien(n)ations* (2007), Gordon Ingram discusses “queerscapes”, mapping, and the use of public space. Ingram suggests first, that an understanding of the causation of unequal social access to resources is needed, and furthermore, that homophobia, the biggest challenge to queer space, normalizes unequal access to resources. Attention needs to be brought to boundaries in place, which take away the queer right to public space, and only then will inequalities become evident to those in the privileged position of not seeing the existing boundaries. Ingram goes on to suggest three factors that enable equal access to space. These include visible queer bodies, queering of adjacent spaces for protection, and places designed to encourage personal reassessment and reflection. Lastly, mapping is suggested to be a method of re-territorialization of space in effort to increase queer access.

²⁶ <http://www.mccchurch.org>

²⁷ (Ibid., 2010)

In *Critical Geographies and the uses of Sexuality: deconstructing queer space* (2008), Natalie Oswin discusses the normalization of heterosexuality, arguing that it is imperative to make non-normative sexualities visible and to resist their marginalization (Oswin 2008). Additionally, Butler notes that normative heterosexual identities are maintained through the policing of hegemonic performances and the shaming of “abnormal” performances through the process of othering. Lastly, the normalization of heterosexuality is discussed in terms of heteronormativity when Browne defines it as the normalization of man/woman opposites meant to come together within heterosexual relationships (Browne 2006).

In addition to the contributions of Queer theory, with regards to the sexuality portion of my research, Critical Geography is used for an understanding of the power inherent in the ability to designate truths to sexuality. I use critical geography because it provides a lens through which the construction of both tangible and intangible boundaries is made evident, thus demonstrating that there is no *a priori* or essential sexuality.

In Melissa Wright’s *Disposable Women and Other Myths of Global Capitalism* (2006), the concept of resignification is introduced. This concept is central to the narratives of female factory workers that Wright interviews at maquiladoras in Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua, Mexico. Women in these factories have to negotiate their identities as “Mexicana” to be able to hold positions of authority in the masculine workplace. In the factory, “Mexicana” is seen as disposable and unprofessional, thus when women who identify as “Mexicana” gain positions of authority, the meaning of the Mexicana identity is re-signified. This resignification is a form of resistance to the myth of disposability that female factory workers live with on a daily basis; “In confronting this myth [of disposability], each woman resignifies its meaning for her.”²⁸ For two

²⁸ (Wright 2006, p.120)

women, the resignified Mexicana identity becomes the “non-traditional Mexicana” woman and the “Mexican American” woman when they obtain positions of power in the factory.

Regarding meaning inscribed into space, Crampton and Krygier discuss the ways in which critical cartography brings recognition to assumptions reproduced via traditional cartographic methods in *An Introduction to Critical Cartography* (2006). Rather than ignoring present categories, critical cartography shows how these boundaries came into being and looks at alternative possibilities for mapping. Referencing Foucault, the authors suggest that mapping is a form of power and works to establish knowledge of space. Additionally, awareness is brought to the power enabled by the ability to map, particularly the ability maps have to inscribe meaning to space, thus creating place. Lastly, the authors call for further investigation into the field critical cartography, particularly counter-mapping and using maps as a form of social, political, and economic resistance.

In *Beyond the 'binaries': A Methodological Intervention for Interrogating Maps as Representational Practices* (2006), Del Casino and Hanna confront the naturalization of identities and the effects of mapping on processes of identity formation. As maps are a method of producing space, they inherently ascribe meaning to those spaces. Attention needs to be given to the way maps create “naturalness” within the confines of identities. The authors suggest looking critically at relationships between the map maker/user, the map, and the space being represented to understand power relations that are concealed by maps. Significance is also brought to maps’ ability to discipline the user through constructing categories of identity without leaving room for transitions or transgressions in the map space representative of actual space. Lastly, it is argued that the construction of binary identities for the purposes of mapping is based on hegemonic discourse and that for this reason mapping will always engage in exclusion.

On the lack of queer visibility, Knopp and Brown review the *U.S. Gay and Lesbian Atlas* of 2004. Although the authors are conclusively in support of the mapping of gay and lesbian identities for the purposes of gaining visibility within heterosexist space, they illustrate areas in need of further investigation. Attention is brought to faulty sources of data, namely the U.S. Census. Although progress has been made with regards to the census now counting couples in same sex relationships in the same household, no room is made for gay/lesbian individuals not in relationships, in which case these people aren't counted. Other faults of the atlas include its lack of representation of non-dichotomous identities of gender and sexuality such as Tran's gender and bisexual identities. Lastly, the authors suggest that although the existence of the atlas is progress for gay and lesbian identified people in terms of visibility and place making, it perpetuates the actuality of the spatial metaphor of the closet by locking people into fixed identities.

Francisco Valdes discusses geographies of identity and how various intersections of identities shape space in *Mapping the Patterns of Particularities: Queering the Geographies of Identities* (2002). Significant to Valdes' is that methods of research affect the "knowledge" produced from it. The "post-modern political identification" that queer is becoming is suggested to be a positive turn away from the narrower gay and lesbian identities, thus including more of a critical view of Valdes' "euroheteropatriarchy". It is suggested that positionality within the field of queer geographies be committed to "liberational rather than traditional" ideals. Lastly, Valdes discusses the anti-essentialist foundations of queer liberation and the constant relationship between anti-essentialist ideals and principles of antistatization in queer liberation projects.

The literature of Queer Theory and Critical Geography provided insight to participants' subjective experiences of living in societies that persecute peoples based on their sexuality, and further reinforced the recognition of the social construction of boundaries that have powerful affects in the Christian community when LGBTQ people have been shunned from other Christian churches because of their sexuality. The biblical literature of Our Hope, as well as referencing the Bible, informed my research by enabling a closer look at the primary texts used at Our Hope, contributing an understanding of literary and verbal discourse employed by church members during participant observation.

CH.4 METHODOLOGY

4.1 Participant Observation

The qualitative methods I used included participant observation, semi-structured interviews, a focus group and the analysis of text. Participation including taking field notes as well as taking photographs inside and outside the church at the site and at Our Hope's events. Each Sunday I attended services I was given a church bulletin by an usher upon entrance to the chapel where services would take place and each Sunday bulletin included, in temporal order, events which were to take place that afternoon. Of the events at each service was a sermon that usually lasted around thirty minutes. Attending church services and events allowed for observation and deeper understanding of how sexuality and Christianity interacted within the church setting and in member interactions. Taking notes during the sermon also allowed me to document by reactions to the sermon and note church member's interactions and reactions to the sermon. I also used my observational field notes when analyzing the text of the online sermon transcripts. Throughout the summer I communicated frequently with participants by e-mail and printed and compiled the communications in a three ring notebook to use as a reference when analyzing Fieldnotes.

I attended Sunday church service for the first time on June 14, 2009. When entering the church three to four church members greeted me and others entering, offering an adhesive name tag to be worn on the upper portion of the shirt or clothing. I observed that the only people wearing name tags on Sundays were those in leadership positions or visitors. Those in leadership

positions became identifiable after I had attended multiple sermons as well as the July board meeting where those same people presented church budget information.

All of the Sunday church services were held in a room called the Chapel. Usually before services church members would congregate and talk outside the chapel in the Presbyterian Student Center foyer where there were four couches surrounding a large square coffee table. At this time there were no members of the Presbyterian Church in the building, as their Sunday service had been held here earlier and everyone had already left. After talking in the foyer, two church members called “ushers” would stand at the chapel doors handing each person the Sunday bulletin, which described what would go on that day during the service. After entering, members would sit in chairs that had been previously positioned in rows horizontally facing the front of the room where, on a higher platform similar to a small stage, Reverend BETH would enter. Reverend BETH always entered through the rear entrance doors after the congregation was seated facing the front of the room. The ushers would then close the doors signaling that service was beginning and Reverend BETH would walk briskly from the rear to the front of the room wearing a black robe that flowed behind her when she entered. Once at the front of the room she would stand on the stage behind a chest-high wooden platform where she would begin service by announcing that everyone should turn and greet their neighbor.

All the sermons I attended between June 28th and August 23rd had the same format and this format was drawn out in the Sunday Bulletin each time people came to church service. The sermon began with a title, and then acknowledged the biblical scriptures the sermon would be derived from, followed by “opening comments” also referred to as “opening creative tool“, “opening illustration, and “sermon theme introduction”. The opening portion of the sermon usually included a personal story of the BETH’S biological family and was followed by a prayer,

again led by the BETH. The prayer functioned as the transition from the opening comments to the content of the lesson, which lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. After the lesson or sermon, the BETH would lead the congregation in prayer. After closing prayer the congregation would exit through the double doors in the rear of the chapel as they were being greeted by BETH.

I took field notes on the church bulletin I received when entering the chapel with everyone else. When I entered, I usually sat in the back of the room and immediately started writing what I saw and heard before the sermon as well as during. When a church member would walk by me, I would usually close my notes. Although I had been introduced to the congregation as a researcher, I felt it would be too intrusive to show my notes lying on the seat next to me or to write during the sacrament ritual. Around mid-July however, this changed. At mid-July, I was halfway through my research at Our Hope when I decided that I needed to make myself appear more as a researcher. I had to do this because I felt that both the Reverend and members of the congregation that I met with regularly at our weekly focus group were trying to convert me to Christianity or at least to their church.

This apparent miscommunication I experienced between myself and the church members became increasingly problematic as the ushers of the church would put their hand on my shoulder and tell me weekly that I was *allowed* to take the sacrament. “Taking the sacrament,” meant standing with other church members in line to the front of the room, where you were fed unleavened bread and prayed over aloud by two other church members who would put their hands on your waist and shoulders. This happened every Sunday and every Sunday I had to repeat that I was not going to take the sacrament. I was usually the only person who remained seated during this time.

Because the same ushers asked me every Sunday to take the sacrament after I repeatedly told them I was not going to, I decided that it would be a good idea to keep my field notes out and start writing during the sacrament rather than hide them, which I was originally doing.

In addition to taking notes I took photographs to document significant spatial phenomena and events. In particular, I was able to photograph and video-tape Reverend Troy Perry, the founder of the International Metropolitan Community Churches. Troy Perry came to visit Our Hope, flying out from California where he lives and where he started the church in 1969. He visited to celebrate Our Hope's tenth year as a church in Athens, GA. I was invited to attend three days of events during which Troy Perry spoke about his life, showed an informational film documentary that he had made and met with Athens' Mayor Heidi Davidson. All the events were held on the University of Georgia campus in August, 2009.

4.2 Semi-Structured Interviews and a Focus Group

Over the course of three months attending Our Hope MCC, I conducted interviews with church members as well as interviews outside the church. I also engaged in discussions with participants before and after church services, at meetings, such as the bi-annual board meeting of Our Hope MCC, and at events including the "10th Anniversary Celebration Weekend" where meetings were held for three days at two different locations on the UGA campus. Lastly, I had informal communications with participants via e-mail. As time went on during my participation at the church, questions developed that I had not anticipated. When this happened, I e-mailed participants who I had already worked with to ask questions. I also e-mailed Our Hope's general website²⁹ with more questions. One participant in particular, KATY, answered most of my e-mails, because she was the person designated to answer the Our Hope's incoming mail.

²⁹ <http://www.ourhopemcc.com>

The focus group was an “affinity group”³⁰ that BETH wanted to form at Our Hope to bring church members closer together. BETH informed the congregation of her plans at the bi-annual Board Meeting on Sunday, July 19, 2009 after church service. The first time we met at her office, BETH told me that it would be difficult for me to talk to people for research because members of the congregation would be apprehensive of my purpose for being there. She said that I needed to gain the trust of members if I expected anyone to agree to be interviewed while I conducted participant observation over the summer. She said that my assistance in starting the first affinity group at the Our Hope would facilitate gaining the trust of members. Therefore, over the course of my research, I put together an agenda of weekly group meetings, sometimes re-scheduling based on my schedule conflicts as well as participants’ needs. I was prompted by BETH to start the affinity group based on something I was skilled at, or in her words using my “God given talent”.³¹

The group was to work on an art project. I chose to organize the group around an art project because I had prior experience teaching art.³² I chose to ask the group to participate in the creation of a giant-sized mandala after doing research on interactive art projects. Mandalas are geometrically structured images that include symbolic representations of meanings chosen by the person creating it; “On the outer level they represent the world in its divine form; on the inner level they represent a map by which the ordinary human mind is transformed.”³³ BETH decided the mandala would contain three sections divided between “past”, “present” and “future”.

Scholars have noted the benefits of conducting research involving participant created art. As Wagner notes in *Images of Information* (1979), “text and pictures allow some of the direction

³⁰ BETH called the group an “affinity group” at the board meeting July 19, 2009.

³¹ BETH suggested that I use my “God given talent” to start the affinity group prior to July 19, 2009, in her office where she also requested praying for me before I left the room.

³² From 2002-2006, I taught youth and adult art classes in Athens, GA and Rome, GA.

³³ The Mystical Arts of Tibet (<http://community.berea.edu>).

that words can give as well as the opportunity to construct one's own explanation that a visual presentation can offer (Wagner 1979, p.55). A second source of support for the inclusion of participant created data is in Dona Merten's *Transformative Research and Evaluation* (2009) where Mertens reviews Chilisa's use of participant created art allowing the participant to explain their context dependant experiences. Chilisa's methods offered, "alternative ways in which researchers may work with communities to theorize and build models of research designs that are owned by the people" (Chilisa 2005, p. 680). At the conclusion of my research I looked to the mandalas church members had constructed that specifically depicted wanting an independent and permanent site for the Our Hope church (See Figure 4).

4.3 Analysis of Text

To maintain the most accurate representation of the content of the sermons I attended, I compared Our Hope's published sermon transcripts with my field notes taken at the church service each Sunday. All, except one, of the nine sermons I attended were transcribed by a member or members of the church and later added to Our Hope's website. After each service I attended, I printed the online sermon transcripts, using the written form of the sermon as research material for more in depth data than I could record taking field notes during the service.

When reading the sermon transcripts I retrieved online, I looked for similarities between each, as well as differences in the structure of the sermon. I also looked at the content of each sermon. Within each sermon I noted the biblical literature referenced and the interpretation of that literature which followed throughout each sermon. The interpretation of biblical text has been referenced as both a cause of homophobia and because of that, influential in confronting religious homophobia. As Our Hope MCC states, "There really is no biased objective reading of the Bible...each group finds a point or points of reference from which to read, reclaim and re-

appropriate the meaning of scripture for the community in liberating and affirming ways....In GLBT communities, the point of reference is often the theme of coming out”.³⁴ I also looked at meaning in each sermon. I found that most sermons included an understanding that human agency existed, while encouraging giving up personal agency with the aim of letting “God” determine what an individual would do, say, think or believe.

³⁴ *Perspectives on Spiritual Transformation*, pamphlet, Our Hope MCC, 2005.

CH.5 FINDINGS

5.1 A Church within a Church: The Politics of Space and Access

Our Hope church met at the Presbyterian Student Center of Athens, GA. Our Hope's financial standing determined their ability to access the space of the PSC.³⁵ Paying a monthly rent of \$725 to the PSC enabled Our Hope to meet Sundays for worship and Wednesdays for choir and to have personal meetings throughout the week held by BETH.³⁶ However, there were limitations to the use of space which were determined by the larger organization that the PSC belonged to which was the national body of Presbyterian Campus Ministries.³⁷ The local and regional scales of the Athens' Presbyterian Student Center and its national parent organization deserve attention regarding jurisdiction of rule making and enforcement of Our Hope's use of space. In one interview, KATY informed me that the Presbyterian Student Center advocated for Our Hope's use of the building when presenting the case to the Presbyterian Campus Ministries, here referred to as the *Presbytery*:

We are not allowed to have a permanent sign because the Presbytery owns the land and they don't really want us meeting at the PSC. The students and campus ministers at the PSC have supported us for 9 years and advocated for us to continue renting the space.³⁸

³⁵ The Presbyterian Student Center of Athens, GA will be referred to as the "PSC" throughout this work.

³⁶ "Lease contract for Presbyterian Campus Ministries, Inc.," December 9, 2009.

³⁷ <http://www.pcuse.org>.

³⁸ E-mail correspondence February 5, 2010.

Interviews were declined twice by members of the Presbyterian Student Center³⁹ which leave the specific rules of jurisdiction ambiguous, however pointing to politics of scale, Lebel, et.al (2005) discuss differential power in the relationship between local and national places:

The greater power of larger places and higher levels has several underlying reasons, including: the dependence of local areas on other places; the greater mobilization capacity of interest groups at higher levels; the heterogeneity of interests and attitudes across local areas; and the dominance of national mass media by higher levels.

The power that Presbyterian Campus Ministries has to form the lease agreement between its branch church and Our Hope which prevents Our Hope's visibility is a power that the local Presbyterian Student Center does not have, although, as in the following case, members of the PSC, at times, assist the PCM in making sure that Our Hope follows the set rules. As stated, "There is often a large gap between small geographical areas where environmental and social injustices take place and the larger administrative or jurisdictional levels where they can be addressed politically" (Lebel, et.al 2005). This suggests a potential that the national PSM and local PSC disagree on issues in part because of a lack of the PSC informing the PCM that Our Hope needs more access to space, which would be an addition to their current stance at arguing for Our Hope's right to meet in their building when approaching the national PCM.

The limited access to space inside the Presbyterian Student Center, as well as outside, resulted in the minimalization of Our Hope's ability to express their material existence. Being able to post nothing to the walls inside, left the building with only PSC decorations including bulletin boards with photos of members of the PSC and a permanent sign with the PSC name on the wall in the Fellowship Hall, thus without interaction with the space of the PSC, no notification of Our Hope's meeting there existed. Our Hope had access to most of the space in the PSC building, but they were not allowed to interact with those spaces. Aside from the short

³⁹ Interviews were declined February 17, 2010 and April 22, 2010.

time period that Our Hope put their small sandwich board sign in the driveway and the posting of Our Hope literature on door of BETH's office, there was no visible representation of the existence of Our Hope at the site of the church.

The most recent lease between the PSC and Our Hope was made on December 9, 2009. I acquired a copy of the lease on March 25, 2010 from KATY who sent it as an attachment in an e-mail. The lease specifically outlines rules that Presbyterian Campus Ministries makes for the relationship between Our Hope and the PCM's local chapter, the Presbyterian Student Center of Athens. It is unclear the extent to which the PSC engages in monitoring Our Hope's activities, however in the e-mail that KATY forwarded to me with the lease agreement, discussion between Reverend BETH and KATY occurred in the earlier portions of the letter where BETH informed KATY of restrictions enforced by a member of PSC:

...he DOES want us to remove the white board & anything off the door, except for the monthly sermon listings. This will all go into effect beginning Jan. 1, 2010...so we may well need to communicate these changes to our worship teams AND we'll also need to begin to make better use of our bulletin board since that will be our only permanent means of communication.⁴⁰

The period of the lease between Presbyterian Campus Ministries and Our Hope was 12 months and agreement was made that Our Hope would pay \$725 a month unless the air conditioning did not work; "...in the event that the air conditioning is not operational on Sundays during the months of June, July and August, this sum will be reduced by \$25."⁴¹ On occasions when the air conditioning did not work, BETH sent an e-mail saying to wear loose fitting clothing. The lease also declared rules of activities in the PSC space: "Should the lessee(s)...use said rented premises for any purpose other than church related activities; then, lessor may, at its option, terminate and cancel this contract and take immediate possession of the rented premises

⁴⁰ E-mail correspondence March 30, 2010.

⁴¹ (ibid., 2009)

without waiving any rent that may have accrued at the time of cancellation.” Any activity the larger PSM deemed unrelated to church activities would result in the cancellation of the lease and the acquisition of Our Hope’s rent money. The lease also governed specific spaces within the church that could be used and at what times they could be used, with penalty of retracting the lease agreement if the rules were not met. These rules included:

It is further agreed that, (a) The lessee(s) will use the chapel, study room, and dining hall from 9:00 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. on Sundays and the chapel from 6:30 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. on Wednesdays. (b) 1-2 Sundays per month, lessee(s) will use additional space (said space to be agreed upon) until 3:30 p.m. The Campus Minister will be notified of these additional uses. (c) Fees for special occasions will be negotiated as needed. (d) The lessee(s) will have use of the office, a storage closet, designated space in the pantry, and designated space behind the chapel wall at all times. (e) The lessee(s) may leave chairs that belong to the lessee(s) in the chapel at all times. Lessee(s) agree(s) that lessor and other building users may use these chairs. Lessor further agrees to allow one small storage cabinet to be maintained in the chapel (not behind the chapel wall) at all times. (f) The lessee(s) may not leave any possessions in common areas except during building use times on Sundays.⁴²

The rules of the lease made Our Hope almost completely invisible inside the church building as well as outside where the Athens, GA community could tell they existed. In the second part of the lease, the forced lack of Our Hope’s visibility became clearly evident:

(g) Lessee(s) may place signs, displays, posters, etc. on the property on Sunday morning. Otherwise, there shall be no signs, displays, posters, bulletin boards, flyers or any other visual displays on the property except on the interior surfaces of the spaces listed above in item 6d. The only exception to this is one bulletin board outside of the pastor’s office. (h) The lessee(s) does/do not have rights to use of space not explicitly outlined in this.⁴³

Upon entering the Presbyterian Student Center a tan cork bulletin board was nailed to the wall with a collage type design made up of pictures of PSC members juxtaposed with words typed on white paper. In the center of the board was a large white paper displaying the word

⁴² (Ibid.)

⁴³ (Ibid.)

community typed in bold black font. The idea of a community at the PSC implied to me that all groups meeting in that building were a community.

To my surprise however, I learned over the summer that the PSC's "community" did not include Our Hope which met inside the building. This conclusion seemed evident in that the MCC had very few opportunities to establish itself within the space of the PSC. Housed within the Presbyterian Student Center, the 30-50 people that make up the congregation of Our Hope MCC are allowed to post in the driveway a wooden sandwich-shop sign indicating the church's Sunday Service, again only on Sundays. The church also meets weekly for choir rehearsal and meetings, however the Sunday church sign is the only sign allowed to be posted (See Figure 3).

KATY commented later in an interview, that church members did want a permanent space for Our Hope to meet, including a sign for the church. Additionally, KATY herself had experienced being in the same situation as the PSC where Our Hope met, during which her former church rented space to another. The interview began by asking KATY:

...you had mentioned in the e-mail about Santo Domingo that some MCC churches can't afford to buy their own space. I'm wondering how this relates to Our Hope. I know that Our Hope met in the Holiday Inn when it first started in Athens, until space could be rented from the PSC- is that right?

KATY replied:

It is very common for MCC churches to start out in theaters and other rented spaces. In other denominations it is common to start at a school, library, or renting space from another church. We have considered all of these options. You are correct that Our Hope met at the Holiday Inn for the first year. Now we have rented from the PSC for 9 years. I was not there when the move happened, so I am not certain about the particulars.

In my response to KATIE I chose to share my childhood church's history which seemed common to Our Hope's situation of having a temporary space to meet for church. I situated myself in this context because of the personal nature of the question to follow in that my questions involved church member's feelings:

...my questions are more about how people feel about this. In my church of origin we had a division for a while which caused (the part of the church I ended up having to go to) to meet in an apartment for a while. I ask you this question because of the feeling I got when I was there that Our Hope felt like a church that needed a building of its own. From my experience, the transitory nature of the church I grew up in felt much different than going to the same church when it was in a permanent building with a sign of its own.

Then, going into detail about the sign, I added,

This is also another thing I noted- Our Hope doesn't have a permanent sign outside that I saw. Why is this? In casual conversation before and after Sunday services I spoke with people who mentioned wanting a permanent sign and a more permanent building. Lastly, I noticed that Our Hope isn't allowed to hang anything on the walls except on Reverend Renee's door (however I might be mistaken-correct me again, if I'm wrong).

To my inquiry, KATY responded;

Our situation is very similar to other renters. We have access to the building on Sunday until 1pm and on Wednesday night for choir. We are fortunate that we have an office at the PSC. We have to put everything away except for a poster on BETH'S door and the bulletin board next to her door. We have to put all of our signage away after each service. We are not allowed to have a permanent sign because the Presbytery owns the land and they don't really want us meeting at the PSC...

You are correct that some people would like for Our Hope to have their own building. They identify a church as the building it meets in. Our Hope does have a building fund with about \$40,000. Last year a small church building sold in Athens for about \$500,000. Needless to say we are nowhere near ready to buy from a financial perspective. We are not meeting our current rent and salary requirements each month. Over the past two years we have looked at renting other spaces and found no space for less than double our current rent. So we are staying put.

Lastly, KATIE added on her previous church experience which involved giving permanent space to its renters. Significant to this part of our conversation is that KATIE volunteered the comparison of her current church, Our Hope, with her past church, "volunteered" meaning I had not specifically asked her about this aspect.

In doing so, she talked about particular rules her old church gave its renters just as the PSC gives Our Hope, but she specifies that her old church gave its renters two methods of spatial permanence. KATIE concludes our conversation, stating,

I came from a church that was on the other side of a rental agreement. We rented our original chapel building to a Korean Methodist Church. Since we had a larger sanctuary across the road and we were the same denomination we allowed them to put a permanent sign next to ours and they could leave their drum set in the chapel. They were not allowed to leave anything else out in the building and we did not provide office space. They had to have their service at 1pm to ensure there was plenty of parking for our members during the 11am service. They also had to pay us extra to use the building at any other time.⁴⁴

Therefore, there was a difference in that although the rules of renting were mostly the same for KATIE'S previous and current church, there was a difference in the amount of allowance given to establish itself as a more permanent place. In "Kinds of Place at Bore Place: Site-Specific Performance and the Rules of Spatial Behavior" (2002), Fiona Wilkie suggests the rules of place, such as those the PSC gives Our Hope, affect those within it; "The experience of a particular place with depend to a certain extent on the role and position of the individual in that place." PENNY and LUCY were two members of Our Hope whose experience was affected by the rule of the PSC not allowing a permanent sign for their church.

After our weekly Mandala Group meeting one evening in July, LUCY and PENNY discussed their desire for a church space and sign when I asked them about the regular Our Hope MCC sandwich shop sign they actually did not post for the Wednesday Mandala Group meeting that night. To this LUCY responded laughing sarcastically, "yeah, wouldn't that be nice, a scrolling marquee." PENNY responded to LUCY about a space that was for rent in a row of small warehouse buildings about three miles away that was advertised on Craigslist, an international website that advertises, among other things, local property rentals in Athens, GA.

⁴⁴ E-mail correspondence February 15, 2010.

Here, PENNY said to LUCY, “Did you see that [warehouse space] for rent on Craigslist? We could have a permanent sign there, we could put it way up high in bold letters ‘Our Hope’.”

LUCY then started to talk about how much the space cost but stopped when Reverend BETH came out of her office behind where we were standing in the hallway. The conversation between PENNY and LUCY made it evident that a different space was desired and particularly a space where Our Hope MCC could have a permanent sign. The impression I received from the sarcasm in LUCY’s voice echoed disbelief at the idea of Our Hope ever having a permanent space of its own. In addition to PENNY and LUCY, other members of Our Hope expressed wanting a church building of their own. One group of participants created a mandala that included a church building with a sign entitled “Our Hope” on the façade (See Figure 4).

Space Syntax is a London based architectural organization that studies how spatial segregation and social disadvantage are related and how building design affects the “organizational culture” within it. The approach of this organization in designing spaces “is founded on the principle that movement and communication are essential to the social and economic success of public and private space and that it is the design of space, above all, which determines the movement and interaction of people in the built environment.”⁴⁵ Without taking away from the fact that people can , to an extent, choose the paths in which they move in the church building, this organization’s founding principle states that the interior design of the space does indeed affect personal interactions within the space.

⁴⁵ <http://www.spacesyntax.com>

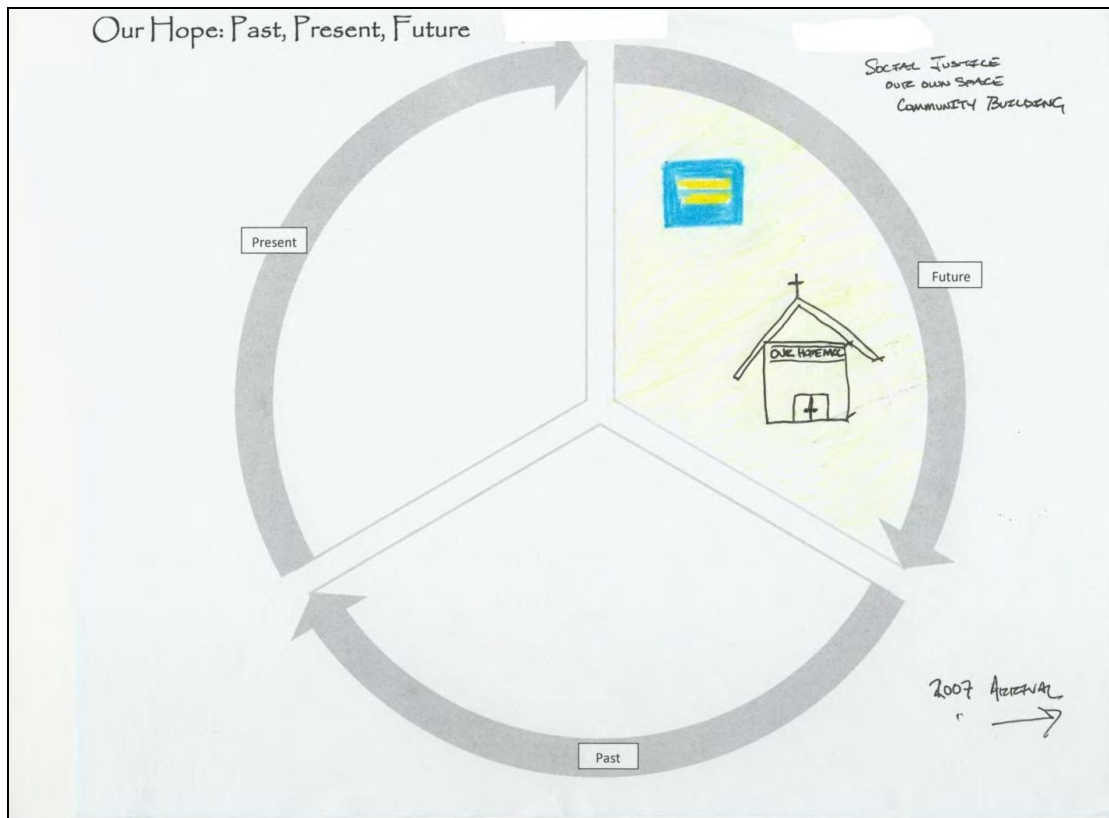


Figure 4: Focus Group Mandala.⁴⁶

Throughout the period of participant observation, I noticed no members of the PSC, that I recognized, attended MCC services although the services were open to anyone. At Troy Perry's widely publicized sermon on August 23rd I sat next to and spoke with MARK and ADAM in the Chapel room of the PSC. MARK and ADAM were members of the PSC who came to attend the rare event of listening to the founder of the MCC preach the sermon this Sunday. When I sat down both men politely introduced themselves to me and told me that they were members of the PSC. When they informed me that they were from the PSC I asked if anyone else from their church was in the room.

⁴⁶ This mandala was drawn July 16, 2009 by a member of Our Hope. Note the top phrasing "social justice, our own space" and "community building". This person also drew an image Our Hope with a permanent sign on the façade of the building.

MARK and ADAM looked around and said that no one they recognized from their church was there. It struck me as odd that I had only seen members of the PSC in the room that the MCC was meeting in one time throughout the summer.

In addition to the politics of space between the Presbyterian Student Center and Our Hope MCC, a similar case of unequal access to space existed at an MCC in Santo Domingo where KATY went on a “mission trip” funded by the Our Hope congregation and outside grants. KATIE spent one month volunteering at the Iglesia de la Comunidad Metropolitana, (ICM) - Santo Domingo. Shortly after returning, KATIE presented her trip to the Our Hope congregation. On August 16, 2009, taking the place of the regularly scheduled Sunday sermon, KATIE showed a personally created power-point presentation entitled “The Story of Justice and Love in the Dominican Republic”. Throughout the presentation, KATIE pointed out the significant concern that the ICM-Dominican Republic had regarding their unequal access to space. Although I had taken notes during her presentation I needed to e-mail KATIE to get clarification on what I had heard of the trip because it seemed that the MCC’s lack of space in the Dominican Republic was similar to the MCC in Athens, GA. Five months after her presentation, I initiated discussion about KATIE’S trip. On January 19th, 2010 I wrote,

It has been a while, but if you have a moment, I have a few follow-up questions about the mission trip you took to Santo Domingo last summer. When you presented your trip at Our Hope a few things stuck out that seemed pretty significant. I'm most interested in asking you about the church you were at and issues about where the church would meet. I remember you talking about the fact that the government would only allow the MCC to meet in the local AIDS clinic and that this caused low numbers of people to come to the church (because of the social stigma associated with the AIDS clinic)... What I'm interested in is why the church had to meet in the clinic and why they didn't have a building of their own.

KATY responded:

The government would not allow the church to hold services in Parque Duarte. Parque Duarte was the site of the Gay Pride celebration. The church wanted to include a church service in the Pride activities. At first they were approved. Then

the government found out that the church catered to the GLBT community so they withdrew the permit. The church met in the AIDS service center because they could not find anywhere else to rent them space. Homophobia is deeply ingrained in the Dominican culture...

It is not uncommon for churches to rent space when they are starting out. They are a new church, only 3 years old, so they have not even begun thinking about their own space. The rental agreement is similar to the one that Our Hope has with the Presbyterian Student Center. I seriously doubt that the MCC Church in Santo Domingo will be purchasing their own space in the foreseeable future. The church was founded by MCC-DC and the pastor is paid by the congregation in DC. The attendees in Santo Domingo are raising funds to apply for incorporation. They are currently a mission of the church in DC.⁴⁷

In KATIE'S story of her mission trip to Santo Domingo, we can see that the Santo Domingo MCC was denied access to space they needed because of their association with the "GLBT" community. The invisibility forced upon KATY'S Santo Domingo church, and the invisibility the Presbyterian Campus Ministries imposes, through the lease, on Our Hope, has the potential to affect members' senses of belonging in the space of the Presbyterian Student Center. Our Hope does have space, but it is an invisible space. It is invisible because they are not allowed to interact with the space they meet in, expressing their existence, except through the placement of one 2ft by 4 ft bulletin board on a wall outside the Reverend's office. Our Hope is also invisible because they are not allowed to have a church sign outside the building with the exception of a small foldable sandwich board sign, about 2ft by 2ft in size, and only for two hours on Sunday when the church meets. The potential for invisibility to affect identity and sense of belonging is discussed in the next section of this chapter where "place-identity" is introduced.

⁴⁷ E-mail correspondence January 23, 2010.

5.2 The Ambiguity of Community

5.2.1 Our Hope as a Place of Belonging

It scars you. You can't go back without feeling the trauma you went through there.
LILY

In many cases, oppression and spiritual violence have caused our members to seek new church homes. That is how they find their way to MCC. KATY

In her book *Straight to Jesus*, Tanya Erzen argues that the main purpose of the MCC is identity reconciliation in stating, “Christians who attend MCCs often frame their choice as living a lie or being true to themselves...the MCC is a space to fuse the sexual and religious parts of their lives... MCC attendees understand their sexuality as essentialist, or innate and immutable.” (Erzen 2006, p.83) In sermons, songs the congregation sang during the Sunday church service, the bi-annual board meeting, and the church’s dispersed literature and website, LGBTQ identities were pronounced as significant to the meaning of the church and this allowed the resignification of Christianity with regards to morally acceptable sexualities. In contrast to this it is significant to note that although the resignification of Christianity at Our Hope allowed LGBTQ members a space in Christianity, I observed no participants directly addressing themselves or each other as queer. Findings in this regard suggest that queer identity was not part of members’ discursive practices at Our Hope. As Erzen notes above, members of MCCs find the church to enable the “fusion” of sexuality and religion, however the fusion of *queer* sexuality and religion did not occur at Our Hope.

Throughout the period between the conclusion of participant observation and writing my thesis additional questions arose. When analyzing my field notes I noticed reoccurring themes that I had not noticed before, such as the concept of “church of origin” which, as my notes came together, turned out to show significant member meaning, as suggested, “Ethnographers give

close attention to the terms or phrases that members regularly use to characterize people and events. Many ethnographers are less concerned with the formal, technical terms that reflect the demands of bureaucracy, public relations and front stage civility; that are drawn to everyday colloquial and often evocative terms” (Emerson, et al. 1995, p.119). In re-reading my field notes the phrase “church of origin” evoked the recognition of the need to look back and specifically address what it meant to participants, as stated, “these [concepts] may not become evident in any one observation or interview, [however] over time by writing field notes and memos such distinctions become increasingly evident to the researcher” (Ibid., 1995).

My observation was that members frequently used the phrase “church of origin” when discussing experiences they had had in the churches they attended before coming to our Hope MCC. Usually the church of origin was a church that the participant felt was oppressive in many ways, namely to sexuality. Some members spoke about having found refuge at Our Hope after they had left their church of origin. Vikki Bell suggests a relationship between place and belonging from the repetition of Sunday church rituals, such as taking the sacrament; “Through embodied movements, the citation operates to recall and reconnect with places elsewhere that, through those very movements, are re-membered; at the same time, a site of diasporic belonging is created” (Bell 1999, p.3).

When I asked about the concept, KATY informed me of the meaning of “church of origin”: “It is simply the church or denomination that you identify as your first church home... most members had early Christian education in another denomination [and] in many cases, oppression and spiritual violence have caused our members to seek new church homes. That is how they find their way to MCC.”⁴⁸ Additionally it was important to see if the concept “church of origin” was only significant to the MCC. Because I was only doing research at Our Hope- I

⁴⁸ E-mail correspondence, February 4, 2010.

only knew of this phrase being used in this church. To gain a broader knowledge of the phrase I asked if there was a general meaning, or if people referred to their church of origin with different meanings; “Is there a general meaning or do you think people each have their own?”

KATY replied:

It is not a term that is exclusive to MCC although it is very popular in MCC. The nature of the denomination makes it rare for a person to have grown up in MCC. This term is not as popular in other denominations because people tend to stick with what is familiar. It is very common for people to remain in their church of origin for their entire life. If people are staying in their same churches (the “church of origin”) then they will not be talking about oppressive religious experiences. The nature of MCC (people coming later in life after coming out) makes this more relevant to our members. There is a movement to combat spiritual violence. This includes oppression and any emotional or physical abuse based on religious ideas. MCC is not unique in addressing any of this, but our members have suffered this at an increased rate.⁴⁹

In a sermon on June 14, 2009, BEN, another member of Our Hope commented on having come to Our Hope because it was a place of acceptance when stating, “...there was a time when we didn’t have this and now we have it.” In her book *Place and Placelessness* (1976), Relph shows how place is significant to identity; “There is for virtually everyone a deep association with and consciousness of the places where we were born and grew up, where we live now or where we have had particularly moving experiences. This association seems to constitute a vital source of both individual and cultural identity” (Relph 1976, p.43). In relation, association with place is considered a factor in the connection between identity and place, a connection known as “place-identity”. The invisibility of Our Hope has the potential to affect members’ identities where identity and sense of place intersect. As suggested, “place-identity, however, has been defined as a component of personal identity, as process by which, through interaction with places, people describe themselves in terms of belonging to a specific place” (Hernandez, et.al 2007, p.310). Place identity involves attachment to a specific place and emanates from

⁴⁹ (Ibid.)

interaction with that space (Ibid, p.311). As attachment to place grows, and is “regulated by factors such as rootedness” (Ibid.), people construct identity to these places. Our Hope’s message is that it offers a sense of belonging, and it became evident, through my observations, that members of Our Hope attended the church because it offered a sense of belonging. However, without the ability to interact with the space they occupy, the complete formation of “place-identity” with the Presbyterian Student Center is prevented. This leads one to think about the effects of Our Hope’s invisibility on its members. It seems a connection can be made between invisibility, the effect of not being able to post literature or claim space of the PSC⁵⁰, and belonging. How does Our Hope’s invisibility affect members’ sense of belonging? I argue that invisibility does affect members’ sense of belonging, if interaction with space fosters attachment to that place, as discussed above, and Our Hope is denied interactions. It is my opinions that this incapacitates the acquisition of a sense of belonging for Our Hope members within the Presbyterian Student Center, although members of Our Hope did express a sense of belonging within the social network of Our Hope.

The social network at Our Hope offered a sense of belonging and provided affirmation of LGBTQ identities by recognizing and accepting people who identified as LGBTQ. Our Hope recognized and accepted the sexual identities of LGBTQ people by displaying symbols in the space they were allowed to use (See Figure 5).

These symbols included a rainbow flag, safe space symbol, lapel rainbow pins (worn by BETH and the ushers), preaching sermons that included messages of God’s love for LGBTQ people, and providing a space for same-sex couples to be out and express open affection with a same sex partner.

⁵⁰ This is with the exception of Reverend BETH’s office and adjacent bulletin board.



Figure 5: Safe Space sign signifies affirmation and a place of safety.

In the book *Queer*, which explains representation of sexuality in the LGBTQ community, the significant history of symbols can be noted, particularly, the safe space pink triangle:

It takes one to know one and it's not hard to know if you can read the signs. Gay men and lesbians have over the years, adopted a number of logos to help recognize each other and to identify themselves in a political sense. The Nazis made gay men wear a pink triangle with the point turned down in the concentration camps to identify them as the lowest of the low. It also identified homosexuals to the allied "liberating" forces so that they could relocate gay men from the concentration camps to a regular jail. Gay men and their families were never compensated in the way that other concentration camp victims were (Gage, et al. 2002, p.50).

The history of the rainbow flag is also discussed. The flag was first designed in San Francisco and is internationally known as the symbol of the gay and lesbian community;

Originally there were eight stripes: hot pink, orange, yellow, green, turquoise, indigo and violet. The colors represented sexuality, life, healing, sun, nature, art, harmony and spirit. Gilbert [the designer] approached the city's Paramount Flag Company to mass-produce it, but hot pink just wasn't available meaning the flag had to be reduced to seven stripes. Things changed again when the Pride Parade dropped the indigo so they could distribute the colors evenly along the 1979

parade route. The Flag is now recognized by the International Congress of Flag Makers, which means it is official (Ibid., p.50).

Through recognizing and accepting people who were not heterosexual, Our Hope affirmed members' identities resulting in the resignification of Christianity, rather than members being forced to change, thus able to keep true to their Christian ideologies in the midst of Christian homophobia.

5.2.2 Segregation and the Staging of "Diversity"

*Our diverse membership, blessed with many talents and gifts, is our greatest asset.*⁵¹

Benefits of participants' experiences at Our Hope were ambiguous. Our Hope was beneficial in that it provided a place of affirmation and also served as a place of social networking. However, issues surrounding the performance of diversity arose when BETH attempted to manufacture a diverse image of Our Hope.

Throughout the summer, mostly in her sermons, BETH referred to Our Hope as a community. As Bruce Berg notes, "A community can be defined as some geographically delineated unit within a larger society. Such a community is small enough to permit considerable cultural (or sub-cultural) homogeneity, diffuse interactions and relationships between members, and to produce a social identification by its members" (Berg 2004, p.260-261). People who attended Our Hope were also considered a "family." On August 23, 2009 during founder Troy Perry's visit, a special tithe was taken during the church service. Before taking the tithe, RICK, a church usher, spoke to the congregation: "It is my honor to say thank you for being here and calling us family...we're going to go over one word and that is 'Opa' and that means family and it is such a blessing to have you as part of it"; "family" and "community" were primary components of Our Hope's message.

⁵¹ www.ourhopemcc.com

In late August, I was asked by BETH to photograph people in the congregation for the website and so that I could make a poster of the congregation to hang in her office. The poster was to be a representation of Our Hope's religious message which was represented by a bible verse, juxtaposed with photographs of members of the church.⁵²

I was instructed to carry out a photo shoot to take pictures for the poster and the photos were supposed to portray Our Hope as a church of diversity. BETH, RICK and others throughout the summer in casual conversation called their church a community, but BETH also specifically directed me to divide the congregation by race for the photos to be placed in the poster. BETH placed a boundary between people, based on race, when she told me to identify the only two black men to be in the photo, JOSH and ANDREW, by their race. I was also directed to identify people by race to take another set of pictures for the poster. This set of pictures would be a compilation of church members' hands where two people's hands would be in each picture (See Figure 6). Similar to the group photo, BETH wanted me to pair the two people in each photo by their race. The directions were to find two people of different races and ask them to be in the picture together. Significant in this process was that, although she had sent a mass e-mail to the congregation inviting people to come to me to have picture of their hands taken, when I got there with my camera she did not give anyone the chance to approach me, rather told me who to photograph and who should be paired with whom.

⁵² The Bible verse was 1 Timothy 1:1: "God our Savior, Jesus Christ our hope." BETH wanted this verse because Our Hope was named after it.



Figure 6: Our Hope Metropolitan Community Church Participant Hands.

In an e-mail correspondence, BETH was authoritative in deciding how she wanted the pictures to look and in addition to a making a poster for the church, she also told me that she was going to put the pictures on the church's website to represent the congregation to the Athens community. Throughout our discussion of how to stage the photos, the division of church members based on their race emerged:

I think it would be good to spend a good bit of time BEFORE choir taking hand photos... it'll be a full rehearsal, I'm pretty sure. So, taking photos before choir & then after 8:30 PM is how we'll need to handle the photos. I'll be sending out an email to the folks to ask them to arrive by 6:00 PM if at all possible to begin photo taking..... As an FYI...the Administrative Council is meeting at 7 PM so we can get hand photos of that group too as they arrive...and, you & I will need to chat about the photos for the anniversary. We can get some hand photos on Friday night....& I'll also give you the ideas about what I want photos of for the anniversary. Mainly, at all of the events, I'd like you to walk around with your camera in hand & ask people if you may take their photos.⁵³

After sending me the e-mail, BETH sent an e-mail to the entire congregation on the church's list serve declaring what I would be doing, however, I had not responded agreeing to the specifics of the photo shoot before she sent the mass e-mail;

⁵³ E-mail correspondence August 18, 2009.

For tomorrow's Mandala meeting, we need to photograph hands for the "project"...so IF you are available, please arrive as close to 6 PM as you can so we can begin photographing hands at 6:15 PM. Amanda Mays will be taking the photos in the various settings, etc. I'm also going to ask Amanda to take some candid shots during choir, during prayer circle at the conclusion of choir, etc. so please be aware of these shots as well.⁵⁴

BETH closed the previous e-mail notifying everyone that the presentation of “diversity” was going to be a goal of the photo shoot; “WE NEED THE CHOIR MEMBERS: Because of the diversity of the choir, we need as many members of the choir to arrive early so we can include them in the ‘hand photos’.” Before I could respond to BETH personally to ask what she meant by “diversity” she sent me another e-mail with further directions:

What I need your help with is making sure the lighting is good, there's a diversity of hands in the shots...gender, race, age, size, etc. Also, I want you to "take charge" of the group--if you will & give them clear instructions for what you want you'll be amazed at how they respond to you. Some of our members are a bit older & if they sense you're hesitant, they will respond more slowly than if you're assertive. I know that may not be your nature, so trust me when I tell you--you can do it & the people will respond well & enjoy working with you on this;

If you'll plan ahead about where you want to take the photos, which poses you want to call for & in which order, etc. Also, I want us at some point--maybe at the end of choir to have as many people as possible to stand close together in a circle, raise their arms in the air & put their hands--pointing upward (almost like a sports team does sometimes) to create a visual image of unity, worship, etc. I don't know if it will work, but I want to try it & see if it will. I'll try to show you what I mean when we get to the PSC tomorrow.⁵⁵

The next day I finally had a chance to respond with my concerns regarding her requests of my services in taking photos for the church. I was also startled at the fact that she was instructing me to “take charge” of the group. I became immediately uncomfortable with her request to authoritatively separate the group by race which was one of categories she wanted for the purpose of creating “a visual image of unity” which she said in that previous e-mail,

⁵⁴ (Ibid.)

⁵⁵ (Ibid.)

when in the e-mail she said to “make sure there’s a diversity of hands in the shots...gender, age, race...” I specifically noticed the pairing of diversity to race more than gender, age, etc. because BETH had earlier said that she wanted me to talk to JOSH and ANDREW, two black men in the group of about 12 white people. She wanted me to tell them ahead of time that when we took the group photo for the poster they needed to separate from each other to mingle with the crowd to show how diverse the membership was. She had also specified separating people by gender, age and size; however everyone that signed up for the photo looked to be the same age. There was one white man whose body seemed larger than the others in the group and this was RICK, an usher at the church, however, BETH did not tell me to talk to RICK about standing next to people that were not his size. To BETH’s e-mail about separating people by race, I responded:

I can meet with you to discuss the photo details after my interview with KATY which starts at 5pm. Secondly, I will be photographing the table with KATY after she and I talk. I actually can't stay after choir to take hand shots. With hand shots being taken before choir, as well as in the administrative meeting I think there will be plenty to choose from. I had not planned to stay after choir as I have other obligations to attend to with regards to preparation for my own academic responsibilities on campus. Lastly, I don't feel I am in the position to determine whether someone is African American or not, for the purposes of establishing the church as diverse. I will do the best I can to include everyone that attends tonight.⁵⁶

Rather than responding directly to my concern about taking charge in dividing the group by race, BETH responded about the timing of the photo shoot. The only thing she mentioned that came close to the actual photo shoot was that she thought it would turn out well and interestingly she attempted to interpret my mental well-being, apologizing for what I assume she thought was a negative tone to my previous communication:

Yes, as far as your taking photos after choir...the only reason I added that was

⁵⁶ E-mail correspondence August 19, 2009.

because you had mentioned in your email that you wanted to take photos from 8-9 PM....with the choir...which is why I asked people to arrive early before choir, so you (nor the choir members) would have to stay late after such a long day for you... I think Friday night, both events Saturday & even Sunday worship will offer you some amazing, one of a kind photos. I'm not sure why I say that, other than because I feel it in my heart! I'm sorry if I made you stress...that was not my intention.

When the day of the photo shoot arrived, I did not ask JOSH and ANDREW to separate as BETH had previously suggested doing⁵⁷. In BETH's directions she mentioned that JOSH and ANDREW were friends and would probably stand next to each other. The day of the photo, I entered the Chapel and stood on a chair that BETH handed me. The group was already there. Standing behind me, BETH called to the group to get together for the pictures, and contrary to BETH's orders, I did not ask JOSH or ANDREW to move. After a couple shots, BETH looked at me and told me to do as she'd said earlier and I did not know what to do. At that moment I had to decide whether I wanted to risk BETH's approval of me doing research there, or keep to my own ethics which meant I would not ask JOSH or ANDREW to do anything. I therefore, chose to keep taking pictures disregarding BETH's instruction. At that point BETH took it upon herself to ask JOSH and ANDREW to move. She asked them to move by saying it was supposed to be a "diverse" shot to put on the front page of the website. When she did this, they both looked at her disapprovingly and then looked at the group and back to her and they did not move. After I took another shot, BETH made a hand signal to JOSH and ANDREW pointing to where she wanted them to stand, but they continued to stay where they were. The fact that JOSH and ANDREW did not move after BETH pointed them out to stand on opposite sides of the group showed that they did not agree to her insistence on creating the look of diversity she wanted.

⁵⁷ The day of the group photo shoot was August 23, 2009.

In relation, Miranda Joseph argues that, “community is all about boundaries between us and them, boundaries that are naturalized through reference to place or race or culture or identity”, wherein the “us” is a *homogenous* group of people (Joseph 2002, p.1; Berg 2004, p.260). Our Hope was a homogenous group bound by a common unity of acceptance of non-heterosexuality, however, BETH used race to divide the community. Placing a boundary between people of different races while staging the photos, divided the LGBTQ community in two parts, thus breaking apart the notion that the LGBTQ community at Our Hope was a cohesive community. I argue that communities can and do include people of different identity categories, i.e. race, gender, sexuality, age, etc., but creating an image of diversity by dividing people based on an aspect of their identity, in this case, race, separates the community no matter how similar or diverse it originally was. As Sherkat notes, “Internal diversity within the UFMCC⁵⁸ is limited and has been noted to create contention and schism” (Sherkat 2002, p.315).

It seemed conspicuous that BETH had mentioned to *me* to place people in the photo by their race because the photo needed to project diversity, but in the e-mail sent to the congregation, she only said wanted a “diverse” crowd, leaving the meaning of diversity ambiguous. She did not mention race, gender, age or size in the mass list serve e-mail, although she directed me to divide people by race to give the appearance of diversity. If the membership at Our Hope was already a diverse community, accepting people regardless of their identity, why was there a need to move people around to meet her *image* of diversity?

⁵⁸ The international group of Metropolitan Community Churches is referred to by some as the “UFMCC”, the “United Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches”.

5.3 Heteronormativity: The Origin Story Goes Unchallenged

Religion says 'this one thing is not available to be questioned'; religion boxes things in.
SAM

A principle message of Our Hope is the acceptance of the lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender and queer population of Athens, GA. The main message on the introduction page of Our Hope's website says, "Our Hope Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) is an active congregation within the international fellowship of Metropolitan Community Church. Like all MCC churches around the world, Our Hope plays a vital role in addressing the spiritual needs of all people, but especially the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and "straight-but-not-narrow" community."⁵⁹ Although Our Hope served as a place of LGBTQ identity acceptance, the historical ideologies of Christianity, derived from Biblical text which functions as a guidebook in all Christianity, contradicted the church's message of challenging heteronormativity because the biblically based ideals from which the church taught essentialized heterosexual relationship between Adam and Eve as the only possible origin of humanity.

Interestingly, Our Hope did not challenge this. In relation, Foucault discusses knowledges as those which are known or not known, but do exist; "The internal organization of every knowledge became a discipline which had, in its own field, criteria of selection that allowed it to eradicate false knowledge or non-knowledge. We also have forms of normalization and homogenization of knowledge-contents... and an internal organization that could centralize knowledges around a sort of de facto axiomatization" (Foucault 1976, pp.181-182).

The International MCC states comments on Biblical scripture; "Christianity is the revelation of God in Jesus Christ and is the religion set forth in the scriptures...proclaimed by the Christian Church in every age and in every land... We believe that the Bible is the divinely

⁵⁹ <http://www.ourhopemcc.com>

inspired word of God, showing forth God to every person through the law and the prophets, and finally, completely and ultimately on earth in the being of Jesus Christ” (MCC *Statement of Faith* 2005). Although Our Hope made a point to acknowledge the ability to interpret the Bible in different ways they did not re-interpret the human Origin Story in the book of Genesis in the Bible. The Origin Story of Christianity teaches that Adam and Eve, a heterosexual couple, were created by God and began the lineage of humanity:

Then the rib which the Lord God had taken from the man He made into a woman...and they were both naked, the man and his wife...this is the book of the genealogy of Adam. In the day that God created man, He made Him in the likeness of God...he created them male and female, and blessed them and called them Mankind in the day they were created.⁶⁰

Adam and Eve then had a son, Cain, who was their first child; “Now Adam knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, and said, ‘I have acquired a man from the lord’” (Genesis 4:1). It is perplexing that Our Hope, a church that teaches the equality of all people, having no one gender or sexuality placed central, marginalizing other sexualities or genders, did not challenge truth claims of the heterosexual relationship between Adam and Eve. Our Hope used the Bible as a foundation to its ethics because they were a Christian church and they say that all Christians are bound to accepting the Bible as the “word of God.” It seemed there was inconsistency in Our Hope not challenging the origin story when they also believed in the practice of non- heteronormativity.

In contrast to the Christian origin story of man and woman, different stories of the origin of humanity exist around the world; one for example is a Yoruban origin story;

In the religion of the Yoruba, the Supreme Being is Olorun, and assisting Olorun are a number of heavenly entities called orishas.... After walking a long time, Obatala grew thirsty and stopped at a small pond. As he bent over the water, he saw his reflection and was pleased. He took some clay from the edge

⁶⁰ Genesis 2:22-5:2

of the pond and began to mold it into the shape he had seen in the reflection. He finished that one and began another, and before long he had made many of these bodies from the dark earth at the pond's side...

Before long, Olorun dispatched Chameleon down the golden chain to check on Obatala's progress. Chameleon reported Obatala's disappointment at making figures that had form but no life. Gathering gasses from the space beyond the sky, Olorun sparked the gasses into an explosion that he shaped into a fireball. He sent that fireball to Ife, where it dried the lands that were still wet and began to bake the clay figures that Obatala had made. The fireball even set the earth to spinning, as it still does today. Olorun then blew his breath across Ife, and Obatala's figures slowly came to life as the first people of Ife.⁶¹

Although a comprehensive examination of world origin stories was not part of this project, this story is used to show that different creation stories exist and some stories do not involve the lineage of humanity stemming from a heterosexual human couple. If we can look at Our Hope as simply a group of people that, rightfully, seek acceptance of non-heterosexual sexuality, how can their primary message not be contradictory to teach that the origin of creation started with sex between a man and a woman? The absolute answer to this question is ambiguous; however the heteronormative origin of humanity *can* be addressed. As Jakobsen and Pellegrini argue, “Heteronormativity describes the moral and conceptual centrality of heterosexuality.”⁶²

In conclusion, the origin story that Our Hope teaches agrees that the heterosexual relationship between Adam and Eve is central to the origin of humanity, ignoring re-interpretations of humanity's gendered, heterosexual origin. This is heteronormative because outside of Christianity, different non-gendered, sometimes even non-human origin stories exist and are considered valid to those who believe in them.

⁶¹ (Railsback 2000, p.23-25)

⁶² (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2003, p.28)

Our Hope did not recognize other origin stories or discuss that multiple interpretations of the origin story were valid or even existed which proved contradictory to the role Our Hope plays in advocating for the fight against social heteronormativity.

The Politics of Invisibility

It is evident by the terms in the lease agreement between Presbyterian Campus Ministries and Our Hope that Presbyterian Campus Ministries plays a key role in keeping Our Hope in the *closet*. The lease agreement states that Our Hope has no claim to space with the small exceptions that Presbyterian Campus Ministries designates are allowable.

Although the Presbyterian Campus Ministries engages in the denial of Our Hope's visibility, Our Hope might be taking on a liberal rather than progressive politics of resisting the social injustices it promotes to challenge on its website, and the liberal rather than progressive stance of the church might be part of the cause of remaining in the closet of the Presbyterian Student Center. As seen with the origin story, challenges to the heteronormativity of the Christian belief system failed to arise during the three months of participant observation I conducted at Our Hope. Offering acceptance and affirmation to the LGBTQ community was a function of Our Hope; however the liberal acceptance of marginalized peoples does not necessitate progressive social action within the larger community, as stated, "Liberals are those who believe in institutions that limit inequality and injustice. Progressives are those who participate explicitly or implicitly in a political coalition that defends and tries to enlarge those institutions" (Krugman 2007, p.268).

This leads to question the role that Our Hope plays in the lives of LGBTQ people that attend. As stated on their website, the "vital role" of Our Hope is "addressing the spiritual needs of all people, but especially the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and "straight-but-not-

narrow" community.” Addressing the spiritual needs of the LGBTQ community, normally marginalized in Christianity, is a liberal stance with regard to accepting people of diverse sexualities, however, acceptance of marginalized people by providing a safe space to meet does not change the larger society’s marginalization of peoples. If Our Hope serves as a place for oppressed people to worship without persecution, but does not progressively challenge social injustices that LGBTQ people face on a daily basis, it seems that LGBTQ people are being kept in a perpetual state of marginalization.

CH.6 CONCLUSIONS

I initially saw Our Hope as only a positive place for LGBTQ people in Athens. There were advantages to the church; the most significant included the social networking spaces provided by Our Hope serving the LGBTQ population of Athens. The social network at Our Hope provided affirmation of LGBTQ identities by recognizing and accepting people who were not heterosexual. In part, Our Hope recognized and accepted the sexual identities of LGBTQ people by displaying symbols in the space they were allowed to use including the rainbow flag, safe space symbol, lapel rainbow pins on BETH and the ushers, preaching sermons that included messages of God's love for LGBTQ people, and providing a space for same-sex couples to be Out, expressing open affection. Although Our Hope did provide a space of affirmation and acceptance, the heteronormative ideologies underlying the Christian roots of the church were not challenged during the time of my participant observation. People at the church never questioned the origin story, nor did they give attention to the *possibility* of questioning the truth of it.

Concerning the discursive use of "queer" and "diversity", members of Our Hope did not specify queer identity and differently than gay, lesbian, bi-sexual or transgender. Participants never referred to themselves as queer in contrast to what I expected would happen going into the research. Studying what "queer" meant was not as significant to my project as I had expected, however the problematic construction of racial diversity became much more a part of my study than anticipated.

Regarding the relationship between Our Hope and the Athens community, the PSC and their parent organization, the PCM, had much influence. Because a rental agreement had been

constructed which prevented Our Hope from having a permanent sign on the outside of the building, there was little opportunity for the Athens community to learn about the church. The scarce material visibility that Our Hope was allowed, was a cause of tension among members of Our Hope furthered desires to have a space for the church to meet where they *could* establish spatial permanence.

In starting my investigation of relationships between sexuality and religion at Our Hope, many questions guided my study but my initial questions changed over time. In the beginning of this research project I went into the church inquiring about the benefits that Our Hope provided the LGBTQ community. Throughout the research I found that benefits did exist, including resignification, however I had originally expected resignification of identity to explain Our Hope's acceptance, as a Christian church, of non-heterosexual people. This inquiry was inspired by Mellissa Wright's discussion of the resignification of women workers' national identities (Wright 2006) as well as Judith Butler's discussion of identity resignification (Butler 1993). However, resignification of identity did not happen, rather members of Our Hope resignified the meaning of Christianity and what it meant to be Christian with regard to accepted Christian sexualities. In doing so, participants' identities did not change, rather ideologies were re-conceptualized.

In studying Our Hope MCC and working with participants I realized that there was no resignification of identity. None of the participants in my research shared stories of their identities changing. Rather, the opposite occurred. The participants in my study actually maintained their identities as gay or lesbian in the face of religious homophobia, particularly many of them who came to Our Hope from oppressive churches of origin. Our Hope re-interpreted homophobic Christian ideologies to show individuals can be Christian regardless of

their sexual orientation. As I learned that participants' identities were not resignified, it became evident that members of Our Hope had pride in their identities, actively establishing the acceptance of non-heterosexual people in the Christian faith.

Secondly, going into participant observation I asked if Our Hope was a site that strengthened the LGBTQ community, however there were multiple ways to define "strengthen." Because the term could not be essentialized it could not be applied to the LGBTQ community as an aspect of study. I argue there cannot be a non-heteronormative church because the biblical creation story for all of humanity practiced by Christianity originates from a heterosexual couple- Adam and Eve. The biblical message of human origin, coming from a heterosexual couple, privileges heterosexuality.

Although Our Hope based its primary message on LGBTQ acceptance, its Christian belief system, privileged heterosexuality. Does belief system based in heterosexuality keep church members locked down into perpetual marginalization? Interestingly, Our Hope actively resignifies pre-modern church songs and readings of the Bible, but does not engage in challenging the heteronormative origin story. If the church preaches the acceptance of non-heterosexual people but does not challenge the heteronormative Adam and Eve heterosexuality and sex for the purpose of procreation, which Christianity teaches is the origin of humanity, it seems LGBTQ people are at a disadvantage.

Although the Christian Our Hope church exercised a central theme of LGBTQ acceptance, they used a heteronormative myth of creation and racial discrimination was part of their practice which proved to disrupt the assumption that a previously diverse community existed before BETH took steps to enforce the creation of it. It is possible that BETH had good intentions in wanting Our Hope to be diverse, however, the fact that she acted deliberately to

create this image during the photo shoot proved that the diversity she wanted did not exist previously to her attempted creation of it.

The Christian belief in the relationship between Adam and Eve beginning human lineage does bring people together who believe the same thing and those people might form a community. Our Hope, a Christian church, taught the same relationship between Adam and Eve, however their outgoing message taught to live in a community that worked against the negative effects of the centrality of heterosexuality in society. Although Our Hope's basic beliefs are heteronormative in origin, they still offer a space for LGBTQ people in Athens, GA. As a researcher, I support Our Hope's role in functioning as a place for LGBTQ Christians to meet without persecution, however I critique the notion that Our Hope could be entirely LGBTQ positive because the Christian story of creation that Our Hope believes in and teaches as the truth centralizes and necessitates the heterosexual relationship of Adam and Eve for the procreation of human kind.

Finally, with regard to constructing the Reverend's "visual image of unity" and "diversity", it was my positionality that made me uncomfortable with having to pose JOSH and ANDREW by their race for the purpose of making the picture look diverse so that Our Hope could publicize itself as a diverse organization. As Yi-fu Tuan says, "A photograph is of the moment- an interruption in the flow of time, captured on film, that becomes a stable "place" for one to dwell in and return to should one wish. Such freezing of the moment was never possible before the invention of the modern camera" (Tuan 2004, p.26) Hence, it was the capturing of this moment that I disagreed with because the choir actually was not actually very racially diverse, as 85% of the choir members were white.

Additionally, on the construction of images, Wagner argues that “by examining photography as a social process- and the photograph as an artifact of this process- we have begun to identify how shared values and conventions influence and shape the planning and production of images” (Wagner 1979, p.117) In examining the social context within which the photograph was to take place, the process by which the Reverend directed me to compose the image would have resulted in the “shaping”, as Wagner notes above, of what the photograph represented, being racial diversity, when 85% of the choir was white. Although interviews did not take place where participants were asked to declare whether the construction of the photograph was racism in action, my observations while acting as the photographer directed to compose an image of “diversity”, for which I would have moved JOSH and ANDREW because of their race, felt personally unethical. Thus, the opportunity I was given to act as Our Hope’s photographer during the time of participant observation enabled documentation of how this community was constructed with regard to its claim to being diverse. Findings throughout this part of the research show that Our Hope’s community was constructed through discourses of diversity that falsely represented the actual racial diversity of the congregation.

Future Research

In addition to the research supporting this thesis, further inquiry should address issues of diversity and community. Investigation should focus on the *relationship(s)* between “diversity” and “community”. Our Hope was regarded as a diverse community on its website, but what constitutes the enablement of diversity? Additionally, is it possible that social marginalization is a characteristic of creating diversity?

In connection, further research should investigate racial relations in LGBTQ churches. How can the relationship between diversity of sexual orientation and diversity of skin color be

characterized? This research should use qualitative methodologies including the documentation of participants' experiences in communities that use images promoting their organizations as diverse.

Our Hope claimed to be practicing a "progressive" form of Christianity, however the meaning of "progressive" is difficult to pin point, therefore inquiry should investigate what counts progressive, and in particular, what ideologies are being compared in order to say one ideology is more progressive than another. Additionally, Our Hope did not engage in challenging the heterosexual relationship between Adam and Eve as the central to the foundation of humanity. To better understand the effects of this in Christian communities, inquiry should be made into potential churches that do employ variations of the origin story and how this affects communities who engage in the resistance of heteronormativity.

In addition to furthering the research on Christianity and sexuality, future literature should bring attention to methodological issues specifically regarding the role of the researcher when conducting participant observation. What ethical boundaries should be set when the researcher is pushed to participate in ways that feel *personally* unethical? When prompted to identify people by race for the purpose of creating a look of diversity, I had to make a decision about what to do. In the end I chose not to ask people to arrange themselves into a "diverse" looking group, but in doing so I risked losing BETH's assistance in helping me gain the trust of the participants, which leads to another question: when conducting research in a church, can the researcher remain *outed* (as a researcher) without explicitly objectifying participants' religious practices?

Conducting research at Our Hope, over the summer of 2009, was both a satisfying and disrupting experience. The research was satisfying because it offered the ability to attend a church without having to join, or even believe in its teachings. However, attending church

services for three months catalyzed an awareness of my own experiences where, during my youth, I was forced to attend a homophobic church. Additionally, issues of identity came up during my research. Because I belonged to the LGBTQ group that I was studying, it was difficult to take on the position of a researcher, which, to an extent, involved the objectification of the people in the group that I was a member of. Feelings of disloyalty arose, particularly when research revealed the religious homophobic struggles that members of Our Hope had experienced, however the research I conducted at Our Hope allowed insight into ways those struggles were overcome.

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