VALUING FAMILIES OR FAMILY VALUES?
THE CITIZEN FAMILY IN THE RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL IMAGINATION

A Thesis

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how family images are used by American Protestant organizations in religio-political causes like advocating for or against gay rights. Specifically, it looks at family images that appear in a Focus on the Family DVD, in four Protestant denominations’ media campaigns, and in the worship services of a particular United Methodist congregation. Family ideology, which is built into family images and into the American viewer's imagination, taps into inner “logics” of which we are usually unaware—assumptions about gender, class, race, sexuality, and what a “good” family is supposed to look like. The paper looks at how taken-for-granted notions have historically limited benefits of legal, economic, and cultural citizenship, and argues for policies and laws that treat various household arrangements equally. Ultimately, it argues for seeing, alongside conventional activism for social change, the potential for traditional Protestant worship practices to help redefine the family in the social imaginary.
For my family, in the broadest sense of the word
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INTRODUCTION

[What is essential goes without saying because it comes without saying. The tradition is silent, not least about itself as a tradition...]
—Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*

Imagine a photograph, seen through a soft-focus lens: The first thing you notice is the smiling faces of four fair-skinned people lying side-by-side on their tummies, all looking into the camera, propped up on their arms, which are bent at the elbows. On the left is a woman wearing a burgundy-colored shirt, probably in her thirties, with long, medium-brown hair pulled back from her face but resting on her shoulders. Right next to her is a boy of eight or nine with short, light-brown hair, in an oversized white t-shirt with dark trim. Those familiar with youth soccer leagues might surmise that his shirt is a two-layered, reversible shirt that allows teams to play as either the “whites” or the “darks.” To the right of the boy is a girl who could be eleven or twelve, with a hint of freckles and hair pulled back into what is probably a ponytail, though we can’t see it. She is wearing a short-sleeved, light-pink shirt, and her collar bone and a bit of a lace “cami” peek above the shirt’s neckline. Finally, a thirties-ish man with dark-brown hair lies beside the young girl with one arm extended out of our view behind her and perhaps behind the boy as well. His other forearm rests on the ground like the others’. He is wearing a short-sleeved, dark-blue t-shirt. The four are lying close together, and perhaps
the photographer has just said something funny, because their teeth are showing and their smiles hint at laughter—just passed or about to erupt. Their arms rest on the spring-green grass that carpets the foreground—perhaps in a suburban back yard. Their bodies disappear behind them into a light, dome-shaped tent. A blue sky shows above and behind the tent and the sun must be shining because wisps of hair of each person glow with light from above—almost like halos. What comes to mind as you picture this scene? What associations do you make as you think about it? Is the word “family” involved? If so, it may be in part from your familiarity with conventions of family photographs, well known to most Americans, as well as experiences you have had on either side of the camera.

The picture I have described is on the cover of a Focus on the Family Magazine, and we will return to it later in this paper. For now, it is useful to note the power of the image, when combined with perceptions you bring to it, in invoking the idea of family. This thesis examines how images of the family are taken up and used by various conservative and liberal American Protestant organizations in religio-political causes like advocating for or against gay rights. I explore how family ideology, which is built into family images and into the American viewer’s imagination, taps into inner “logics” of which we are most often unaware—assumptions about gender roles, class, race, sexuality, and what a “good” family is supposed to look like. As Bordieu’s quote above suggests, they go without saying. They are unspoken and thereby all the more powerful—especially when associated with our religious traditions.
THE FAMILY

Notions about the nuclear family are among those most taken for granted—seemingly without source. Pierre Bourdieu uses the notion of *habitus* to think about these kinds of ideas—what he describes as “an embodied history, internalized as a second nature and so forgotten as history” (56). Sara Ahmed compares following inherited ways of thinking to our inclination to walk on well-trodden paths when we come upon them, adding to the “well-trodden-ness” of them and thereby increasing the likelihood that others will follow (16). Understandings of family are precisely in this category of uncritically absorbed assumptions, which is why their influence is so potent.

In reality, however, what we think of as a “natural” and universal family form in the United States is less than 200 years old. Throughout history and across cultures, the organization of households has varied greatly but the idea of “isolated nuclear families” did not arise until the Victorian age (Bellah 291). Nevertheless, as Penny Edgell explains, “taken-for-granted culture is powerful because it is taken for granted—what is not named cannot be challenged or critiqued, and institutional routines of practice and nostalgic family rhetorics organize material resources in ways that reproduce cultural models automatically” (147). Especially among conservative Christians, many imagine the current family form as a God-given biblical arrangement. Ironically, the reality is that religions as varied as ancient Judaism, early Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and the early Catholic Church, all originally put the family at a low priority. The will of God overrode familial and social priorities for ancient Judaism, as well as Islam, for example. Early Christianity and Buddhism both had a suspicion of the family. Although family ties were respected by the Catholic Church, they were long viewed as second best to virginity or
monastic vows (Bellah 292-294). Today, however, religious organizations and ideas are among the strongest sources of institutional support for family ideology.

In fact, family is intricately tied to religion. Among the many reasons people affiliate with religious organizations, some of the most common are to pass on faith traditions to their children, to spend time with their families and children, and to generally construct a life centered around marriage and parenting (Edgell 50-1). Because ideas about the family are especially taken for granted in religious practices and rhetoric, religious organizations have great cultural power to “shape our understandings of the family and moral evaluations of changes in family life” (Edgell 146).

Societal ideas about the family matter because they have material effects. I discuss in chapter 1 how U.S. public policies in the twentieth century have often excluded people from benefits of citizenship or civil rights based on these “habits of mind.” Exclusions flowed, in part, from assumptions about race, class, gender, and sexuality encoded in the “traditional” patriarchal family form. In fact, there has been a pattern of family-related governmental regulation in response to anxieties stemming from societal change. Lingering unease about changes over the past few decades involving issues like gender roles, divorce, openness about sexuality, and legalized abortion is part of why there is a cry for defending “marriage” and “the family” today. Growing public support for gay civil rights reawakens these worries. American Protestant voices and rationale have been significant in debates over these questions.

Especially for theologically, socially, and politically conservative Christians, increasing public acceptance of these changes feels threatening on a number of levels. Among the most disturbing for conservative Christians is that it calls into question a
sense of order—more specifically, order based on moral and religious “truth,” although it is also expressed in ideas about “natural” and/or biological order (e.g., notions that biological gender differences should determine gender roles). Going against the divinely created “natural” grain, they feel, invites chaos. Many long to return to the order of a time when they believe there was more agreement among Americans about what was right or wrong, about gender differences, and about what was to be “tolerated.” Moreover, they may feel that growing acceptance of some of these new ideas casts those who disapprove in an outdated and intolerant light, while changing norms call into question the “changelessness” of moral “truth,” threatening to weaken their sense of moral authority.

On the other hand, for theologically, socially, and politically liberal Christians, some of these changes resonate with their sense of social justice and egalitarianism. Mainline denominational churches have historically played a major role in social movements such as temperance, anti-lynching campaigns, abolition of slavery, women’s suffrage, and civil rights movements. In keeping with their progressive orientation toward religious and moral “truth,” they have adopted an open stance toward religious and moral change based in part on a commitment to tolerance and civility in the face of religious and moral pluralism.

While the two groups have much in common, the framework supporting their sense of moral order could be said to rest on emphasizing different ideas. While that of more conservative Protestants highlights ideas about eternal and natural truths, that of more liberal Protestants highlights egalitarianism. It may help to place these notions of “moral order” within a larger context.
MORAL AND SOCIAL ORDER

In *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Charles Taylor argues that Western modernity has embraced and is in fact inseparable from "a new conception of the moral order of society" based on the notion of equality among all individuals, which shapes our "social imaginary." He describes the social imaginary as "not a set of ideas; rather, it is what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society" (1-2). Taylor examines how Grotius' and Locke's theories about Natural Laws were taken up by Western elites in the eighteenth century, strongly influencing American ideals of equality and freedom as expressed in the Declaration of Independence and Constitution. He makes several points that are relevant here about how this new moral order differs from the one it gradually came to replace. First, he distinguishes it from the Christian Gospel idea of moving toward an ideal moral order whose time is "not yet." The new order is instead an imperative prescription for "the here and now" (6). Secondly, he distinguishes it from a moral order that is organized around the idea of a "hierarchy in the cosmos" reflected and expressed in society. The new order is anchored to "a feature about us humans, rather than one touching God or the cosmos" (10-11). This shift in thinking undermined existing Western notions of hierarchical complementarity, the idea that everyone's role was considered important and necessary, but that some were more highly valued than others—that it was "'normal' and right that the feet should be below the head" (12). Taylor describes the application of this new presumption of equality as gradually spreading to more and more contexts, with family and gender relations as the last bastions of hierarchical order, the rightness of which has been comprehensively challenged only relatively recently (16). It is in the family, in other words, that ideas
about religious, gender, race, sexual, and class privilege have held out the longest—which is part of why representations of family are so important.

Twentieth-century application of the new moral order’s egalitarianism to family issues is in part what inspires the representations of family discussed herein, with more theologically liberal Protestants tending toward support of it and more conservative ones tending toward resistance to it, both tied to their respective sense of order. I examine the liberal/conservative divide in U.S. Protestantism more fully in chapter 2, but it is worth noting here that for both groups these ideas about the moral order are central and closely tied to their sense of identity.

IDENTITY Branding

Religious organizations, no less than others, rely on advertising to construct an identity and sell their “products,” which include explanations about how the world is and how it should be. The connection between advertising and religion is not as surprising as it may seem to be at first glance. Laurie Patton has drawn parallels between advertising and myth in that they are both tools of cultural persuasion. She describes ads as talking about ultimate concerns, like life, health, and happiness, and sees them as turning products into brands by mythologizing them (lecture at Ohio State March 3, 2008). This fits well with the advertising industry’s notion of ads as “truth well told” which holds that saying the right thing about a product is not enough; rather “you’ve got to say it in a way that people will feel it in their gut” (Hurman). Furthermore, although people approach ads with skepticism, they may have more openness to messages from trusted religious sources. The stories and images in advertising from these sources are often not
understood as overtly “political” (and are therefore less suspect), although they are nonetheless able to do political work. Moreover visual imagery, which is often a strong component of advertising, can convey meaning at a less conscious level and can therefore more easily address that which “goes without saying.”

I argue that Protestants groups examined within this thesis use representations of families to brand certain arrangements as legitimately “family” to make a case for their ideas about moral order. This paper explores explicit and implicit ideas about the family which are embedded in narrative and visual images within the branding campaigns of several Christian organizations and the assumptions about moral order they seem to make. They include a Focus on the Family DVD on gay marriage, the denominational branding campaigns of three mainline liberal denominations and a more conservative one, and the ad campaign and practices of a particular mainline liberal denominational congregation. I examine advertising techniques and strategies they use, which I hold are especially well suited to their branding projects.

Although we associate branding with fairly recent advertising practices, it is far from a new idea. According to the Old English Dictionary, its earliest use dates back to 1000 BCE and the epic poem, Beowulf. Initially, it was associated with burning and destruction by fire; then in 1385, it was used by Chaucer to refer to the torches of Cupid and the Furies. There are sixteenth-century references to branding flesh with a hot iron as a way of marking ownership (of animals or slaves), or as a way of stigmatizing—either with a physical mark on the body (with criminals) or in a figurative sense. In seventeenth-century literature, branding is conceived as a way of leaving an indelible mark on one’s memory. The notion of applying a brand as a trade-mark—whether by
burning or other method—dates back to 1827 with markings on casks of wines, timber, metals, and other commodities. Finally, in 1958, the idea of “brand-image” emerged as a way to describe “the impression of a product in the minds of potential users or consumers” (OED). There are, then, several ways to conceive of branding, and this paper engages several of them.

One way the thesis looks at branding is that in which branding campaigns work to align an identity with a product, company, church, or other organization by associating it with traits or aspirations consumers associate with themselves. In this way, branding hails us, calls us into affiliation with the branded item. Lynn Schofield Clark uses Nike as a classic example in that the company “[lays] claim to…our sense of achievement, our love of sports, our high self-expectations, our desire to see ourselves as unique individuals” (11). Naomi Klein refers to early twentieth-century advertisers who discovered “the spiritual side” of advertising, who recognized that it is about telling stories and conjuring feelings, establishing emotional ties, helping corporations “find their soul.” Properly understood, she says, branding is about seeing corporations as “meaning brokers,” about corporate “transcendence,” presenting products not as commodities, but as “concepts: the brand as experience, as lifestyle” (6-7, 20-21). Lynn Schofield Clark describes how a variety of religiously-themed products allow people to participate in “religious lifestyle branding” as a way to express their religious distinctiveness (23). The religious environment in the United States has long been thought of as a “spiritual marketplace.” It is not terribly surprising, then, that religious institutions themselves participate in branding campaigns—not just to compete for “customers,” but to communicate to current followers about their religious identity, and
to engage in meaning making. These purposes are part of each of the branding
campaigns examined in this paper.

A second way of conceiving of branding considered here is the notion of branding
the memory. Like Ahmed's image of the well-trodden path, these branding campaigns
enable mental branding through repetition of visual and narrative images of the family,
and/or by building on previous images or ideological frames. Focus on the Family, for
example, uses certain family images on the cover of its monthly magazine that reinforce
its notions of what a family should look like. In fact, photographs serve a similar role in
families. They sustain family memory and help perpetuate familial myths while they
have the effect of "naturalizing cultural practices and of disguising their stereotyped and
coded characteristics" (Hirsch 6-7).

Related, a third way of conceiving of branding I want to highlight is how images
can work to "brand" bodies. My study of an anti-gay-marriage video shows how Focus
on the Family uses a photograph of two gay men to stigmatize and to brand gays as "not
family." On the other hand, based on my ethnographic study of a congregation that
features visible GLBT participation in such "family" church activities as baptisms and
celebrating births and adoptions, I argue that it effectively brands GLBT households as
"family."

Overview

Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini tie together American citizenship, sexuality
and regulation of the family by arguing that freedom and privacy are given not to all
citizens, but "are actually held out as rewards, not rights, and only to those who belong to
the right kind of family” (9). Sex, they say (following Gayle Rubin) is seen as a threat to
the moral order of things, and the family is the solution to regulating sex while
maintaining an illusion of sexual freedom. Sex, in other words, is freely available to
people who organize their lives according to the state’s definition of the family, justified
by a sense of shared, presumably secular, morality. Jakobsen and Pellegrini hold that
U.S. morality is really born of a conflation of morality and religion—not even a generic
“Judeo-Christian” religion, but specifically Protestantism. This notion is key to
understanding the branding campaigns described below because sexuality is central to
how each organization imagines the family.

Religious ideas about family have worked at times to disenfranchise people and
have had real economic effects. Chapter 1 provides a historical examination of the
influence of normative family ideology on citizenship through twentieth-century U.S.
government and business policies, such as New Deal legislation, collective bargaining
laws, and hiring strategies, in which women were always conceived of primarily as wives
and mothers. As part of this history, the project analyzes how political movements have
produced discourses about the family to promote their cause, as in the case of the
conservative movement in the mid-1960s, and the civil rights movement. As policy-
makers in public and private sectors have gradually incorporated egalitarian ideals into a
variety of contexts, they have had an effect on gender and family relations—directly or
indirectly. For instance, the inclusion of “sex” as a protected category in Title VII of the
Civil Rights Act of 1964 opened the door to thinking of women as “workers” and people,
separate from their roles as wives and mothers. These innovations disrupted taken-for-
granted gender, class, and race privilege encoded in ideas about the family, and they have
also provoked reaction from those who feel threatened by ensuing changes—giving rise to a pro-family movement that links religious, social, and economic conservatives. This chapter traces these shifts in the cultural imagination and material effects on various groups’ participation in American citizenship.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 provide separate analyses of branding campaigns of religious organizations that convey a spectrum of political ideas across Protestant Christianity. These campaigns both reflect and inform ideas about the family in the social imagination. The chapters move from focusing on a conservative Protestant organization to a comparison of three liberal mainline Protestant denominations with a more conservative one, and finally to a particular mainline denominational church that takes a theologically and socially liberal stand.

In each case, a central issue which has become the battlefield upon which the various organizations try to define the family is that of non-heterosexual couples and families. Together campaigns of the mainline liberal denominations could be said to endorse what Jakobsen and Pellegrini refer to as the disestablishment of the privileged family form that family values rhetoric seeks to maintain. Jakobsen and Pellegrini argue that “attacking homosexuality functions to draw attention away from other no less fundamental challenges to older sexual orthodoxies and arrangements: the changing role of women; increasing numbers of single-parent households; the lowering of social stigmas around out-of-wedlock childbirth” (9). Although they are framed in moral terms, these changes are the result of economic and social change. And while the majority of Americans have pragmatically adjusted to some of these transformations, anxieties remain. For those worried about their own or others’ relaxation in attitudes about
sexuality—e.g., sex outside marriage, cohabitation, contraception—“regulating homosexuality helps to affirm for ourselves and for others that we have not abandoned all our moral principles” (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 9-10).

The first branding campaign, examined in chapter 2, is part of a Focus on the Family attempt to brand homosexuality as “not family.” This chapter includes a close reading of images of families and accompanying text used in a Focus on the Family anti-gay-marriage training video, *Why Not Gay Marriage?*, alongside the image of an ideal family featured on the cover of its monthly magazine. Taken together, I argue these images use the conventions of family photography to promote heteronormative, white, patriarchal family privilege in the face of changes they see as threats to it. Focus seems most afraid that societal acceptance of homosexuality and gay marriage (along with divorce, feminism, and household diversity) will “destroy the family.” The biggest threat, however, is perhaps not from gay marriage, but from other more theologically and socially liberal Christians who, by some measures, seem to increasingly define themselves against media representations of Christianity which they perceive as rigid and judgmental.

Chapter 3 looks at the branding campaigns of three mainline liberal denominations, which I see as “anti-branding” campaigns in that their ads characterize them as not judgmental, not rigid, not old-fashioned. The chapter also looks at twentieth-century shifts in American Protestantism to contextualize how and why family issues divide liberal and conservative Protestants and how in some ways the two groups define themselves in reference to each other. Liberal mainline denominations’ branding projects reflect a recognition that their followers have already, to some extent, embraced pluralism.
and family diversity (Wilcox and Williamson). At the same time the denominations are trying to draw new members, including those who may fear their “unconventional” families are not welcome in church. One aim of these denominations’ ad campaigns, then, is to construct themselves as accepting and “unconventional” families as “accepted” or more accurately to construct as “family” some who are traditionally constructed as “not-family.” I analyze the images and text that compose the branding campaigns of three mainline liberal Christian denominations compared to that of a more conservative denomination which is oriented toward a traditional understanding of families, race, and gender roles. While the aim for all the campaigns is primarily to establish distinctive denominational identities, I show how subtle and not-so-subtle messages about family are embedded within each campaign as well.

Finally, chapter 4 provides an ethnographic study of the worship services, the advertising campaign, and individual congregants of a particular church, King Avenue United Methodist Church. I attended Sunday morning services for almost a year, participated in a small group, and conducted semi-structured interviews with twenty church members. My conversations and observations gave me an opportunity to learn from people what meanings they associate with their church “brand,” and what church experiences contribute to their understandings.

This church brands itself as “welcoming” and “accepting,” a central element of which is a huge vinyl banner on the church bell tower that proclaims: “ALL are welcome. Experience inclusiveness as God intended.” Newer members of King Avenue United Methodist Church talk about reading the message with skepticism at first, and the banner would not have meant anything, they say, if they did not find acceptance to be a
reality inside the building. Their initial cynicism is in keeping with current perceptions in the advertising business about consumer behavior. In an industry journal, an ad planner explains how declining consumer trust in advertising has affected general marketing philosophy: “Without any consumer belief in truth, the ‘well told’ bit becomes rather academic” (Hurman). The “new” thinking is that advertising needs to follow the 16th-century wisdom of Michel de Montaigne that “actions speak louder than words.” In fact, fittingly for purposes of this paper, the ad man closes his article with a quote from St. Francis of Assisi: “Preach the Gospel at all times. Use words if necessary” (Hurman). These church “shoppers,” then were looking for those “actions that speak louder than words.” My interviewees’ responses indicate this campaign has apparently been successful, regardless of whether or not marketing philosophy has informed church advertising or worship decisions.

In interviews congregants repeatedly described acceptance at this church as “tangible,” remarking specifically on how gay and lesbian and other “non-traditional” families participate prominently during church services in rites and rituals that typically have been reserved for “conventional” families. Acceptance is also constructed through music and other affective technologies. As a participant/observer, I saw first-hand the rituals to which my interviewees referred. I argue that repeated exposure to these situations has effectively branded a variety of household arrangements as “good” or “legitimate” families within the church. In fact, I assert this congregation’s worship practices are part of their commitment to rearranging their own thinking about homosexuality and family in what I call “affective activism.”
Following Saba Mahmood’s description of the woman’s mosque movement in *Politics of Piety*, I see this congregation characterizing its project as moral rather than political. Mahmood distinguishes Bordieu’s concept of *habitus* from that of Aristotle. Briefly, Aristotle refers to “an acquired excellence at either a moral or a practical craft, learned through repeated practice until that practice leaves a permanent mark on the character of the person...[which] implies a quality that is acquired through human industry, assiduous practice, and discipline” (Mahmood 136). In discussing agency Mahmood concedes that there is some deference to social norms in the mosque movement (e.g., it appears to reflect and reproduce women’s subordination). However, she holds that “action does not issue forth from natural feelings but creates them” (157, emphasis in original). Furthermore, she acknowledges the potential of religious practice and membership to give members a claim to moral authority from which to speak and challenge others (179). Similarly, King Avenue practices tend to reinforce the notion that having children in a household is important in defining it as a family, reinforcing to some degree a traditional understanding of family. Nevertheless, my informants consistently related to me their perception of the King Avenue worship experience as liberating.

Mahmood’s project further informs mine in its attention to the power of corporeality in the making of subjects and objects (166). Her study of the women’s mosque movement challenged her ideas about how social change works: “From this perspective, transgressing gender norms may not be a matter of transforming ‘consciousness’ or effecting change in the significatory system of gender, but might well require the retraining of sensibilities, affect, desire, and sentiments—those registers of corporeality that escape the logic of representation and symbolic articulation” (188).
King Avenue similarly takes its project to the embodied level. And though it reinforces the notion that children are an important part of what constitutes a family, other parts of the equation have been made more flexible through embodied practices. Changing ideas about the family form is not the point. Acceptance is the point. Performing acceptance in this case (acceptance of “all” with a focus on GLBT specifically), however, necessarily has an effect on ideas about the family. This affective activism—entered into with some intentionality in terms of a commitment to “becoming” a church that embodies “acceptance” of all, specifically GLBT—is based on a tradition of understanding God as accepting and as an example of what Christians/Methodists ought to strive to be. Of course, the existence of this congregation within the body of the United Methodist Church has an impact on what it means to be a Methodist—and a Christian for that matter. They do not see this as a political project, but rather one of ethical, spiritual, and social justice.

These various branding campaigns represent collective struggles for cultural as opposed to legal citizenship, waged outside frameworks typically associated with citizens’ rights. They make an argument for a religio-ethical context for understanding citizenship based on a broader notion of human rights and citizenship than that contained in a more restrictive legal model. Particularly King Avenue can be seen as asserting the right for those with alternative familial arrangements to be recognized as deserving of full cultural citizenship rights. Rina Benmayor and Rosa Torruellas define cultural citizenship as

affirming the right to full membership and participation in society through cultural rights...defined...by the cultural foundations and vernacular practices of people themselves, in their own...terms...In short, to affirm
cultural citizenship is to collectively come to consciousness around the denial of human, civil and cultural rights; to articulate new visions—new cultural ‘imaginings’—of equality; and, through culturally specific practices, to act collectively for change (188, 190).

A sense of collective identity plays a significant role in this transformation process and helps establish solidarity. For those who attend King Avenue, a shared understanding about the rights of all families to participate fully in the life of the church informs a sense of moral and religious authority they can carry beyond the walls of the church.

Taken together, the analyses of the branding campaigns in this paper contribute to a deeper understanding of how religious identity is connected to ideas about family, how church membership is connected to moral concerns and making sense of current moral dilemmas, and how traditional practices can be used to contribute to social change. The link between Protestantism, citizenship, and American sensibilities about morality and the family make the branding campaigns described in this paper ideal sites for exploring the work family ideology does in American society. These campaigns are a good measure of change that has already taken place in recent decades in the social imaginary regarding ideas about the family. At the same time, the various campaigns are also evidence of resistance to that change and a push for further transformation.

I see great potential for societal change in the actions of this congregation and others like it, although I do not have a sense that King Avenue envisions itself as having a strategy to effect broad social change beyond its own congregation—or certainly beyond the United Methodist Church. Revising the law (the aim of much activism) in regard to issues that relate to prejudice and stereotyping (against non-traditional families in this
case) is not the most effective kind of modification. The law can regulate behavior but does not affect the underlying cause of the behaviors it seeks to change which is located in attitudes or imagination. Moreover, it can be hard to adjust a law before change takes place in the social imaginary. Regardless of whether these ideas consciously informed King Avenue’s or any of the branding campaigns described herein, the advertising and affective technologies they employ make sense. For instance, women’s view of themselves had to change, to a degree, before the women’s movement could really take hold. Furthermore, public opinion affects elected officials’ comfort level with proposing or approving new legislation and/or the electability of those already in favor of it. Therefore, advertising and the church’s affective technologies are among the best vehicles for change because they work at the site of the imagination. Before turning to the campaigns themselves, it will be useful to consider the role of ideas about the family in regulating access to full economic, cultural, religious, and legal citizenship in recent U.S. history.
CHAPTER 1

A CITIZENSHIP OF ONE’S OWN:
RIGHTS AND THE QUINTESSENTIAL AMERICAN FAMILY

Privilege tends to be invisible to itself…and it is often more visible to those outside
it because they bump into it all the time.
—Renato Rosaldo, "In This Together," lecture at Stanford University, May 2, 2000

The twentieth-century story of women’s and minorities’ struggles for inclusion in
full citizenship is intertwined with the story of changes to the family, and equally
important, changes in public “habits of the mind” about the family. In fact, it is all but
impossible for historians studying the twentieth-century United States to avoid taking the
family into account. The family plays a significant role in works of history that focus on
areas as varied as consumerism, labor unions, and the civil rights movement. This
chapter explores approaches and interpretations of a variety of scholars regarding the
influence of normative family ideology on government and business policies, changes in
the family during the twentieth century, and how political movements have created
discourse about the family to promote their cause. These scholars show how, within a
context of shifting expectations and realities regarding gender, race, and class equity,
ideas about the family are mobilized to define or defy limits on various groups’
participation in American citizenship. Together, these examinations of history point to
the family as a productive site for understanding twentieth-century American struggles
for change and resistance to change.

Generally, these histories combine to tell a story of how twentieth-century public
policy was informed by, and reinforced, ideas about gender roles and the family inherited
from the nineteenth century. In her book, In Pursuit of Equity, Alice Kessler-Harris sets
the stage. In a context of industrialization, men formed unions to bargain for safe and fair
conditions. Meanwhile, wage-earning women—always conceived of as wives and
mothers or potential mothers—came to be protected by various state laws during the
Progressive Era. As reformers and unions increasingly called for a family wage for men
that would allow wives to stay at home, gendered ideas about “normal” family life
became entrenched.

1 Political theorists and philosophers have engaged in important debates about citizenship for thousands of
years. Global changes in populations have reinvigorated these discussions. An excellent examination of
various positions among current thinkers and a history of where their ideas are rooted is in the introduction
to The Citizenship Debates: A Reader. When discussing American citizenship, then, I recognize many
ways of understanding it. I have already made reference to a distinction between cultural and legal
citizenship as described by Benmayor and Torruellas. Social and economic citizenship are also considered
within this chapter. These distinctions are important when considering the lived realities of people’s lives.
Doreen J. Mattingly provides an excellent explanation of the way feminist scholars have shown how gender
and family shape citizenship in the U.S. by conceptually dividing the world into “the public (masculine)
sphere of employment and politics and the private (feminine) sphere of the family and interpersonal
relations...For the most part, citizenship in the United States has been defined in terms of participation in
the public sphere, and therefore equated with male forms of employment and political participation...As a
result, the ideal citizen has been understood to be an employed man with a dependent spouse and children”

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HABITS OF MIND

Kessler-Harris argues that, due to belief in the “ideology of family” and the privileged position of the “male breadwinner,” in the first half of the twentieth century most people did not believe women had the same right to work that men had, and that as a result “women’s constitutional liberties were severely circumscribed” (21). She asserts that “gendered habits of mind” helped shape ideas about normalcy and economic fairness at a time when, during the depression of the 1930s, authority for discussing and making public policy was shifting from states to the federal government. These old norms were built into national policy as New Deal legislation created unemployment insurance, old age insurance (Social Security), collective bargaining laws, and minimum wage laws. The New Deal emphasis on conferring rights and benefits through employment, rather than through residence or national citizenship as in other countries, hardened class, race, and gender categories. Women and minorities, whose jobs were not covered by most of this legislation, were left unprotected. Kessler-Harris notes how these policies legitimized claims of workers (usually white men), while means-tested benefits for immediate relief, like Aid to Dependent Children and Maternal and Infant Healthcare (for women and children), were quickly stigmatized as welfare (66).

Kessler-Harris sees this New Deal creation of a rudimentary welfare state as an important moment in the national understanding of who is entitled to and what constitutes what she calls “economic citizenship,” which she defines as “the achievement of an independent and relatively autonomous status that marks self-respect and provides access to the full play of power and influence that defines participation in a democratic society,” including the right to work (12). Further, defining gender as a process, “a system of
thought” that “always contains hierarchical race and class components” (6), Kessler-Harris shows how the gendered worldviews she illuminates in the book, and the policies that flow from them, have powerful and uneven effects on categories beyond gender.

Through an examination of court documents, judicial decisions and briefs, government hearings and records, and other conversations and correspondence—especially among government commissions and labor union leaders—Kessler-Harris traces the rationale behind legislative and judicial changes in social policy, focusing on shifts in language describing gender roles. In so doing, she highlights the political meanings of words like breadwinner, household, and family, and exposes women’s exclusion from economic citizenship which flowed from societal concepts of them as dependents, “secondary earners,” and indirect beneficiaries of a “family wage” for men. These assumptions informed discussions that led to and flowed from the Fair Labor Standards Act, the Full Employment Act of 1945, the Social Security Act and amendments, modifications to Federal Income Tax law, and equal employment policy of the 1950s and 1960s. She tracks the slow, incremental changes in how various people viewed these concepts by the mid-1960s that eventually made space for a complete reordering of ideas about fairness.

The detailed recounting of these debates and conversations provides convincing evidence of the gendered thinking Kessler-Harris wants to foreground. It also gives attention to the many different voices and nuanced points of view even among those advocating for gender equity, including how profoundly they, like everyone else, were influenced by taken-for-granted notions about family roles and masculinity. For instance, she tracks equal rights feminists who believed that, though no one should feel pressure to
work, marriage and motherhood should not preclude a woman’s entry into wage labor if she desired it. On the other hand, she carefully follows the evolving thinking of social feminist (or maternalist) women’s organizations, which worked for decades to safeguard the home by fighting for special protections for women at work, in effect fighting to maintain gendered differences. With the inclusion of “sex” as a category protected from employment discrimination in Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the national imagination began to open itself to women’s theoretical personhood, separate from the family, and their inclusion in the category of “workers.” Kessler-Harris builds toward what she sees as a turning point in the early 1970s, by which time about half of all married couples included two wage earners. She tells the stories of how individual maternalist leaders gradually came to see that achieving respect and protection for motherhood and other family responsibilities came, at least to some extent, at the expense of economic equality, which they increasingly saw, as other feminists had already argued, was necessary for full citizenship.

To the extent that they focus on citizenship based on economic considerations, In Pursuit of Equity and Lizabeth Cohen’s A Consumers’ Republic overlap to some degree. Both books note an intensification in class, race, and gender inequalities in post-World War II America that stemmed in part from policies and practices that favored traditional families. Both Cohen and Kessler-Harris also note how changing expectations influenced desires, attitudes, and behavior. Cohen frames twentieth-century America as a “consumerized republic,” in which citizens imagined they had the right to consume equally, and many used their consumption as a tool to effect societal change. Kessler-Harris, on the other hand, emphasizes new expectations of fairness shaped by the private
welfare state's increasing advantages for wage workers, especially union members. As policies focused on rights that adhered through employment, it raised the stakes in the question of who has the right to work.

Although gendered government policy is not as central to Cohen's book as that of Kessler-Harris, when it does arise, it is the GI Bill of Rights that is most prominent in her discussion, as well as income tax codes on which Kessler-Harris also focuses. The GI Bill disproportionately gave men access to important avenues to full economic citizenship such as education, property ownership, and credit. Notably, Margot Canaday points out in "Building a Straight State: Sexuality and Social Citizenship under the 1944 G.I. Bill" that homosexuals were systematically excluded from GI Bill benefits through undesirable discharges. Cohen characterizes such policies as signs of government support for a "male-directed family economy" which favors "the traditional male breadwinner-headed family and the male citizen over the female within it" (Cohen 137, 144). Cohen, Canaday, and Kessler-Harris all note that many of these policies were not only gendered, but raced, and that the families that most benefited were white.

In Freedom Is Not Enough, Nancy MacLean also points to white men as the primary winners of, not only government, but business policies as well. Like Kessler-Harris, she emphasizes the family wage system as a key factor in workplace segregation by race, sex, and sometimes national origin. MacLean neatly summarizes how normative family thinking influenced both government and business policy: "Believing male labor the norm and female labor an aberration, employers and policymakers constructed a labor market biased toward men, especially white men, and devised social welfare policy that shored up male-dominated households while weakening others" (16).
While MacLean and Kessler-Harris point to the impact of gendered and racialized “habits of mind” on both government and business policies, there is also evidence of employers, even entire industries, consciously using these stereotypes to their economic advantage. For example, Jefferson Cowie’s Capital Moves shows in intricate detail how sex-typing and a rigid sexual division of labor worked in the electrical home-appliance industry in general and RCA specifically from the 1930s to the end of the century. RCA’s practices were founded on a system of wage discrimination by sex that was fundamental to the industry. RCA, like others in the business, specifically recruited young, single women based on the fact that it could pay them less than men, and on the presumption that young women were more submissive and therefore easier to control and less likely to organize against company practices. Management argued that women were biologically well suited to detailed, repetitive work because of their “feminine patience and deft fingers” (Cowie 17-18). Interestingly, Cowie says “the factory regime played with the existing gender system to create and recreate the cheap-and-docile [workforce] formula” but notes that “the incorporation of women into wage work also presented the mechanisms for small but important transformations in patriarchy itself [as having money of their own] gave women increasing freedom to question the domestic division of labor” (196).

Cultural Change in the 1960s

In fact, the gendered ideas and practices examined by Cohen, MacLean, and Kessler-Harris began to face strong challenges in the 1960s, not least because more and more women entered the workforce. In America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s,
Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin comment on the large number of women entering the paid workforce, especially women over 45, which, in 1960, "was beginning to undermine the domestic ideal" (13). Similarly, Kessler-Harris points out a dramatic increase in numbers of married women in the workforce in the 1950s, especially those with young children, as well as rising rates of divorce, unsanctioned marriages, and female-headed households (due to out-of-wedlock births), all of which contributed to a weakening of the consensus on what constituted a "normal" family (161-3).

Isserman and Kazin also highlight changes in sexuality during the "Long 1960s" (by their estimation, the mid-1950s through the early 1970s) that had an impact on the family and the concept of "family": the wide-spread use of contraception among married women (especially with the advent of "the Pill"); the 1953 Kinsey Report's revelation that half of American women had had sex before marriage, and that a fourth of married women had had sex with someone other than their husbands; the Roe v. Wade decision on abortion; and homosexuals' new openness about their sexual identity. Isserman and Kazin also emphasize feminists' linking of private life—housework, child care, sexuality, and childbirth—to social and political power and credit the movement with fundamentally changing the relationships between the genders. As a result, they assert, women's career and household expectations became more egalitarian (309).

Changing expectations were further fueled by new policies in the 1960s. Both Kessler-Harris and MacLean recognize Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 as pivotal in its eventual effect on jobs for women and all people of color, but perhaps more importantly, in its ability to inspire those engaged in struggles for equality, especially for blacks and women. MacLean calls Title VII "a powerful tool with which to open an
entry into the economic mainstream” (36). Kessler-Harris credits the policy with putting “gender at the center of an impassioned national conversation around equality” as well as revealing “the limits of economic citizenship for privileged women and welfare mothers alike” (246).

Interestingly, Kessler-Harris also notes that the inclusion of “sex” as a category in Title VII’s prohibition against job discrimination helped shift the thinking of many women toward imagining themselves as individuals rather than family members. Until that time, women’s complementary role in the family was assumed to be natural, and therefore their marginal place in the workforce was also seen as natural, even positive, rather than a result of prejudice or discrimination. All that changed as the civil rights movement became the model and the identification of race with sex as subjects of oppression created new ways of seeing women’s place in society (Kessler-Harris 241). Cohen, on the other hand, envisions marketers as initially approaching the family in the Consumers’ Republic as a consumer unit, but then zeros in on the fragmentation of the family and society that resulted in part from a change in marketing strategies that focused on family members separately. Kessler-Harris points to problems that stem from government policies that treated families as a unit rather than as individuals. Putting gender at the center of her examination, Kessler-Harris sees the significance for women’s individual recognition and participation in citizenship. In any event, both the legitimacy gained by various societal subgroups and the attending boost to identity politics that Cohen sees as arriving with marketing segmentation, as well as new constituencies Kessler-Harris sees as arriving with Title VII, contribute to strengthening the equal rights movements.
The origin of the black freedom movement, as well as an opposing movement of “white conservatives, aiming to fend off change” actually begins after the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* against segregation in education. MacLean dates the start of these “two insurgent movements” at 1955 (35). Lisa McGirr, in *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right*, also sets the conservative movement’s birth at the late 1950s, but she distinguishes a shift in its discourse in the mid-1960s from a primary focus on the common enemy, communism, to an emphasis on a somewhat newer enemy, liberalism, and an embrace of tradition, including church values and the family. In fact, religion and family have a prominent place in both social movements.

THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN CHANGING IDEAS OF THE FAMILY

Of course, the role of black churches and Dr. Martin Luther King in the civil rights movement is well known. At the same time, many people turned to religion to make sense of rapid social and moral changes of the 1960s, which for some led to participation in social movements that advocated for race and gender equality. Others took refuge in ideas best summed up by a Billy Graham *Decision* magazine slogan: “The Unchanging Gospel for a Changing World.” While mainstream Christian denominations were losing membership, conservative denominations grew, especially in the decade that began with 1965 (Isserman and Kazin 251-269).

MacLean contrasts the “Social Gospel, Sermon on the Mount humane theology” of the egalitarians with the “fighting creed of an Old Testament and martial Christianity” of conservatism (47). Both used Christian values and family in their efforts to plead the
case for their cause. In her description of the civil rights movement strategies in the face of societal discomfort with what would eventually be called affirmative action, MacLean explains that activists tried to “ease that recognition [of the need for special treatment for black citizens] by rooting the cause in widely shared values” (59). They purposefully crafted appeals in terms of equal employment as an alternative to welfare dependency, and gender-based arguments for racial equality that posited jobs for men as keys to strengthening the family (59-60). Similarly, the American GI Forum “waged their campaigns for equal treatment [for Latinos] from deep within the dominant culture, appropriating classic conservative themes of family, religious devotion, and patriotism in their quest for justice” (MacLean 180).

While many members of minorities and women were protesting for fuller participation in economic citizenship, making their voices heard through the equal rights movements, many conservatives were feeling voiceless and powerless to stop the momentum of change that seemed to threaten societal order and stability. According to Lisa McGirr, at the heart of the growth of the evangelical revival was a middle-class response to perceived threats from sexual liberation, the women’s movement, the growing Left, and the youth culture movement, which inspired an “effort...to assert their sense of a properly ordered world...by championing family values, authority, and tradition backed by the authority of the ‘word of God’” (McGirr 241-2). She notes that “religious entrepreneurs” in Orange County adapted to what folks wanted by providing moral certainties in a time of change. “They won adherents exactly because they failed to account for the material causes for the social breakdown of families, for drugs, and for social violence, namely, the free market and the deep class divisions it generated”
(McGirr 256-7). Nevertheless, membership in churches that helped explain social upheaval, and in the broader conservative social movement that spoke out against it, no doubt represented conservatives’ desire to have their voices heard as well. At a time when rebellious forces seemed unstoppable, conservatives felt compelled to exercise their citizenship in new and powerful ways.

Two developments that inspired conservative response in the 1960s were the U.S. Supreme Court ruling removing state-sponsored prayer from schools and the arrival of sex education in schools. It is not surprising, then, that McGirr’s account of the rise in conservative activism begins with local schools, which served as concrete arenas in which conservatives expressed worry over their loss of control in their children’s religious and moral values (159, 179). McGirr emphasizes parental fears about losing authority over their children due to the public schools’ imposition of secularism, scientific rationalism, and liberal values. In With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America, William Martin also places local school battles prominently in his chronicle of the rise of the Right, characterizing a 1974 Kanawha County, West Virginia, textbook controversy as being instrumental in bringing right-wing politics and right-wing religion together (142). Martin also raises as pivotal the conservative response to a 1978 IRS threat to revoke the tax exemption of private schools that did not meet racial integration standards. Martin quotes conservatives who attributed parents’ strong response to this situation to their frustration with government interference in their control over their children’s education, as well as parents’ recognition that tuition fees would rise significantly if their schools lost tax exemption (173). McGirr remarks on the increasingly successful coalition of conservative economic elites and social
conservatives, who found they could invigorate grassroots activism using single-issue campaigns (225).

MacLean refers to a number of these issues in her discussion of how the conservative movement in the 1970s deployed family politics to attract Americans who were turning to religious orthodoxy. The movement exploited concerns about matters such as abortion, the future of household arrangements in light of changing gender roles and sexual mores, and the spread of feminism (MacLean 247-8). She specifically mentions Phyllis Schlafly’s STOP ERA campaign in which Schlafly “cultivate[d] housewives’ political identities as victims of inclusive policies” (MacLean 246). Aiming at the “minority of women still reliant on the family wage bargain,” the campaign warned them that feminism “threatened to end the cultural authority of the already faltering male breadwinner system, diminishing the claims of women who depended on it” (MacLean 246).

McGirr draws attention to a similar coalescing of issues and groups according to a shared “worldview in which God ordained natural roles for men and women” (232). She relates how conservatives saw abortion as a threat to women’s traditional identities as wives and mothers, and in attributing an “abortion mentality” to the women’s rights movement, they linked antifeminism, “pro-family,” and “pro-life” initiatives (232). Similarly, conservatives perceived the growing gay rights movement not only as a challenge to traditional ideas about right and wrong, but also as a threat to the family (McGirr 257).

*With God on Our Side* recounts the rise of the pro-family movement in the context of President Carter’s 1980 White House Conference on the American Family, which was
attended by citizen delegates representing the full range of opinions on all the questions. Martin refers to the very same “family” issues cropping up at the conference as those named by McGirr and MacLean. Polarized from the start, delegates could not even agree on a definition of “family.” The most conservative representatives argued for limiting the application of the term to “people related by blood, adoption, or marriage, and to establish the basic unit of husband, wife, and children as the norm,” purposefully excluding unmarried partners, unwed mothers and their children, and especially homosexual relationships (Martin 178).

Other delegates, including single mothers, those divorced or widowed, those without children, and homosexuals, were bewildered at what seemed an unrealistically narrow designation. A gay delegate who worked in child welfare, and who incidentally also served as a foster parent to two homeless children, later remembered his surprise at this battle over the definition of family. He commented that his work exposed him to a whole range of families, and

…that’s America. That’s the reality, and I’m not sure we’re going to “turn it around”…The question for me was “How do you make that work?” not “How do you make that bad?” But for a lot of people at that conference, the traditional, stereotypical American family was their reality, or the reality [they believed] America ought to be returning to, and they felt very strong and very emotional about that issue (179).

Looking back, a leader in the pro-family movement who attended the conference explained her understanding that the “biblical call” to feed the hungry does not mean to pay taxes and have the government do it, but rather it requires people to cook meals and take them to the homeless shelter. She believed families “can solve their own problems if the government will just leave them alone” (187). Alternatively, one of the few black
delegates to the conference remembered it as “battle of the haves against the have-nots...a thing of middle-class women getting together and putting their agenda[s] on the table. And some of us were kind of in the way” (188). What she had hoped for was an opportunity for delegates to understand one another, to “work out some women’s issues and some minority issues” (188).

Women’s and minorities’ issues were tied to changes in public “habits of the mind” about the family. Reimagining the family was closely linked to shifts in gender, race, and class hierarchies that were embedded in family ideology. These changes, however, shook ideological foundations for conservatives who were invested in the traditional structures. MacLean refers to a James Baldwin quote that captures the sense of dislocation these changes created: “If you move out of your place everything is changed. If I’m not what that white man thinks I am, then he has to find out what he is” (9). As conservatives felt the momentum of changes moving like a steamroller over long-established “truths,” they felt powerless and disenfranchised. In response, they turned to their churches to make sense of it all, exercised their citizenship in voices of protest, and worked to build alliances to regain political influence. An appeal to protect the integrity and authority of the traditional family was an important part of coalition-building rhetoric.

McGirr’s Suburban Warriors’ closing includes her opinion that the Right has been successful because it has, “in the face of social and cultural change...spoken to concerns over the autonomy of communities, the erosion of individualism, the authority of the family, and the place of religion in national life” (272). McGirr believes these ideas resonated with middle- and lower-class people not only because they were “familiar
but also because at their core they seemed to safeguard these people’s way of life and a set of power relations in American society they wished to preserve” (272). As if in reply, MacLean revisits in her epilogue a theme that resonates throughout *Freedom Is Not Enough*, that “economic security...is vital in order to exercise the personal autonomy Americans value so dearly and to build the strong families and communities they also desire” (335).
CHAPTER 2

FAMILY PHOTOS...OUT OF FOCUS:
THE RHETORIC OF ENDANGERED FAMILY

A path is made by the repetition of the event of the ground 'being trodden'
on...When people stop treading, the path may disappear.

―Sara Ahmed, Queer Phenomenology

“Dear Friend,” the photographer begins, “your family is changing so fast...Don’t
you wish you could just ‘freeze time’ and hold these special moments forever?” On his
web site, Kent Eimers tells how he left behind a potentially more lucrative career in
commercial photography and instead “CHOSE to become a professional family
photographer,” a “Memory Giver,” because “making a WHOLE lot of money” is less
important to him than “making a difference.” As a “family person,” he goes on to testify
about why this matters to him. Eimers’ mother died of cancer when he was fifteen, and
because photos were not a big priority in his family, he has few pictures from his
childhood and none that include both of his parents and him together. Now he realizes
that, although he is a photographer, he too has neglected to take family photos, to
“capture” precious early months in the life of his daughter, Katie-Grace (now three).
Clearly he wants us to learn from his lessons: that family is what is truly important in
life, that our families as they exist right this minute are fleeting, that we need to save them—preserve our families before it is too late.

Furthermore, he advises that the photographer you choose “Should Care About YOUR FAMILY AND YOUR MEMORIES, Not Just About ‘Making A Buck’ Off You.” In a pages-long letter format that closes with his signature, Kent Eimers’ web site contains promises to use his understanding of the “psychology” of photography to capture “your family’s true bonds and relationships.” He prides himself on becoming “a family friend of every family I photograph.” He will get to know your whole family so well that he will learn what makes each person smile “naturally,” and they will feel so comfortable that they will produce “perfect expressions” every time. Your family will look “the happiest and best they have ever looked together.”

The pictures such promises produce are both evidence of and a good metaphor for rhetoric about the endangered American family and the sentiment on which they are built. Like worry over endangered species, family photo production is always in response to a sense of impending loss—an anticipatory nostalgia (Choy 74). But especially because photos are seen as self-evident, as products of a neutral machine—the camera—they need to be interrogated (Wexler 179). There is a history of using images of the family and sexuality politically; a recognition of that fact is essential to an informed review of family photographs circulated by political actors. This chapter seeks to disrupt some taken-for-granted ideas about family to reveal what assumptions and fears are written into “endangered family” images, and what they obscure—whom they render invisible. Framing family as a “moral” issue allows conservatives to mask the fact that policies they favor limit material cultural and economic citizenship benefits for others. It is exactly

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this type of political use of family images to stir up support for exclusive policies that
stimulates mainline liberal denominational responses that use family images to marshal
support for inclusive policies, as I argue in the next chapter. In any event, looking
carefully at how family ideology is taken up in political arguments is crucial. Turning
public attention toward truly fragile families, as well as the potential of alternative
household arrangements to meet individuals’ varying needs, is one step in moving toward
public policy based on reality, rather than rhetoric.

FOCUS ON THE FAMILY

The photograph in Figure 2.1 was taken by Kent Eimers. Clearly his philosophy
is compatible with that of Focus on the Family. Focus, too, is worried about family. On
the magazine cover is the warning that you need to “Know Your Family.”

Beware of the threats of divorce and idols lurking in your home. Take control of sex
education. Also, note that this photo includes subtle allusions to the vulnerability of
family. The fact that they are in a tent hints at the frailty of the “home.” The soft-focus
and lighting give an ephemeral, halo-ish effect, making the family members look like

2 Focus on the Family is a conservative Christian organization started by James Dobson in 1977,
which, according to its web site, “is committed to coming alongside you and your loved ones in our work
of nurturing and defending families worldwide.” It produces a variety of daily radio and TV broadcasts, a
monthly magazine and newsletter, all of which circulate nationally, and a host of other publications,
including DVDs like the one examined in this chapter. The organization’s stated mission as publicized on
its web site is "to cooperate with the Holy Spirit in disseminating the Gospel of Jesus Christ to as many
people as possible, and, specifically, to accomplish that objective by helping to preserve traditional values
and the institution of the family."

In recent years, Focus has established Focus on the Family Action, a legally separate organization
“created by separating out of Focus on the Family those activities which constitute lobbying under the IRS
code...[to allow Focus] greater freedom to take our views to the public square.” The web site of this
501(c)(4) entity more overtly states Focus on the Family political goals which include “fighting for the
Marriage Protection Amendment and against judicial tyranny” among many others. The respective web
sites are www.family.org and www.citizenlink.org.
Figure 2.1: Cover of Focus on the Family with Dr. James Dobson, July, 2006
angels. This tenuousness and idealization fit with Marianne Hirsch’s notion that “photographs can more easily show us what we wish our family to be, and therefore what, most frequently, it is not” (8). Photographs can work to codify class and identity—reflect a set of choices made by the photographer. The camera records more complexity than the photographer intends, revealing much about the photographer and the audience for which she or he stands (Wexler 167).

While it expresses precariousness, there is also great power in this image. Similar images of families grace the cover of this magazine monthly, as well as on Focus on the Family web sites and its monthly political action magazine, Focus on the Family Citizen. As Foucault has said, power is strongest in practices held as normal and natural (89)—like family, like family photos. In fact, this photo demonstrates what Marianne Hirsch calls a “‘hegemonic familial ideology’ imposed by a ‘monolithic familial gaze’”:

[T]he ideology of the family is as much subject to particular historical, social, and economic circumstances as the lived reality of family life. What may be constant, however...is the existence of a familial mythology, of an image to live up to, an image shaping the desire of the individual living in a social group. This myth or image—whatever its content may be for a specific group—dominates lived reality, even though it can exist in conflict with it and can be ruled by different interests. It survives by means of its narrative and imaginary power, a power that photographs have a particular capacity to tap. (8)

As we saw in chapter 2, this family mythology is powerful in shaping policies that have material effects. It erases the historical fact that it is constructed, and puts the family at the center of a religious and moral order. Wendy Kozol, who has studied images of family in Life magazine, would agree. Her work suggests that visual images

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<sup>3</sup> It is noteworthy that the magazine’s title, along with the political action Focus on the Family encourages in the magazine and the Focus Action web site, combine to mobilize the idea of religious citizenship.
combined with ideological messages can exert much power, especially those that are regularly published and reinforced by a trusted source over a long period of time (10-11), and Focus on the Family is surely such a source for many people. Nonetheless, hegemony is never stable; it must constantly be secured (Kozol 10-11). And even though he would say family is “natural” and timeless, Focus on the Family’s James Dobson has a sense that it is endangered.

Dobson’s influence is unique. Speaking as a father and grandfather, he marshals the authority of family-ness—kind of like the “Father Knows Best” for children and families. Speaking as a psychologist, he marshals the authority of science. Yet he has built his organization around Christianity. In fact, people routinely mistake him for a minister, which is significant for this discussion in that “…religious systems are in the business of constructing the world and then naturalizing its meaning as ‘true’” (McAlister 130).

In “Families under Fire,” a 2004 address to the National Press Club, Dobson describes how he began “focusing on the family” in 1977. He says he felt that family was starting to unravel because of divorce, the marriage penalty tax, abortion, and feminism, but he singles out the threat of same-sex marriage as the “most dangerous national policy being considered…the most intrusive of all ideas” (Focus). In light of this menace, Focus created a DVD called Why Not Gay Marriage? as a training tool for grassroots objection to same-sex marriage.
WHY NOT GAY MARRIAGE?

Interestingly, and contrary to most Focus on the Family materials and books by Dobson, the DVD is set up as self-consciously non-religious. Tom Minnery, a grandfatherly looking man in a suit, tells us in the introduction that its arguments in defense of “marriage as one mother and one father” are composed of “common sense, historical facts, and scientific research results” rather than scripture—speaking from “how God’s world works” rather than “God’s word,” reasoning that the DVD’s aim is to reach as many people as possible (Why Not Gay Marriage? Introduction).

The body of the DVD features Glenn Stanton, Focus on the Family’s director of social research and cultural affairs and senior analyst for marriage and sexuality, giving a power point presentation that answers the ten questions relevant to the debate about same-sex marriage (see Figure 2.2). Stanton talks about the importance of “replicating ourselves,” of teaching the arguments to others. Stanton’s remarks highlight how the family enables organizations like Focus on the Family to expand their movements. To stir his audience to engage in this “battle,” he quotes a “powerful same-sex marriage lobby” as saying: “We’re not going to win at the ballot box until we start winning at the water cooler and in the church pews” (Why Not Gay Marriage? Preface).

There are only two images of families in the DVD. The first one (shown in Figure 2.3) is offered up in answer to Question 2: “Is same-sex marriage like interracial marriage?” Where was the loving photographer for this family’s photo? We do not even know who took it—it is not attributed. One might imagine Kent Eimers tsk-tsk-ing. A close examination of it helps illustrate what Laura Wexler describes as the photographer’s choices, his or her “taking possession of the scene by configuring and
Figure 2.2: Glenn Stanton in video, *Why Not Gay Marriage?*, giving a power point presentation on how to engage in debate about gay marriage.
Does any data say this is harmful?

Figure 2.3: Photo of biracial family featured in *Why Not Gay Marriage?*
recording when and as one wished” (167, 179). What may strike the viewer first is the odd angle, which seems almost demeaning, evoking a mental picture of the photographer looking down on the family—figuratively and literally. Eimers might also criticize the photographer's choice to capture the family wearing these particular facial expressions. The dad seems cautious, almost mistrustful. The mom’s smile seems forced, too smiley, especially compared to the dad. The son looks tentative, uncertain, and the dad seems to be holding him down somehow. The daughter’s face is questioning, and she has one sleeve rolled up, the other covering her hand. The clothes seem a little hodge-podgey compared to most professional photographs—color wise and otherwise. The symmetry in the children’s gender and race seems contrived. And the background is completely white—not a classic, sophisticated white backdrop of a studio, but a sterile lack of any background, as if it has been completely sucked out of the picture. What story is this picture trying to tell? It does not appear to have been created to show the healthiness of interracial families. A quick search of Google images finds an array of celebratory images that can show that. Why does Focus choose this one?

One might surmise that this image has been chosen by someone who is not really quite comfortable with interracial marriage. In fact, the image does not seem terribly comfortable with itself. It brings to mind Foucault’s idea of the power of normalization as a form of control (89). Family photo conventions invoke a normalizing gaze which classifies and controls. The fact that this photo does not quite fit the “norms” helps construct this family as irregular. “Does any data say this is harmful?” “Maybe so,” the picture seems to answer. The picture allows its viewers to keep prejudices that say mixing races is still kind of a dangerous idea. We might imagine the anticipated audience
that the placement of this photo represents: a white, middle-class, heterosexual, patriarch-friendly, monogamously married audience.

Interestingly, the DVD includes its own audience who, to all appearances fit that description exactly. In a setting that could be the main common room in a massive, luxuriously “rustic,” hyper masculine hunting lodge, Glenn Stanton addresses a gathering of perhaps twenty to thirty people (Figures 2.4 and 2.5). What he tells them is that racism is about keeping the races apart, while marriage is about “bringing the genders together, male and female, about celebrating diversity, bringing male and female together to a unified whole” (Why Not Gay Marriage Question 2). The audience, then, enjoys the reassurance that they are broad-minded, and they can feel good about their acceptance and participation in “diversity” as heterosexuals, while maintaining an unstated vague sense of unease about other races and the mixing thereof.  

It is worth noting that the audience appears to be somewhat older—beyond childbearing and probably even childrearing years for the most part. Thus in addition to providing a normalizing gaze, their presence can testify to the nostalgic loss of the ideal family of earlier years. They bring the authority of memory. What they are mourning must have existed.

The only other image of family in the DVD (Figure 2.6) completely ignores family photo conventions. Why was this picture chosen to represent gay families? Not including children in the picture means we see no mothers or fathers. So this family is

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4 For an insightful discussion about the connection between whiteness and family ideology, see Chapter 3 of Sara Ahmed’s *Queer Phenomenology*, especially pages 120-129. Briefly, she points to the use of familial metaphors to understand “races” as having “shared ancestry.” Conversely, race is used to define the family. Her analysis of phrases such as “likeness” and “shared attributes” carries over into an examination of whiteness as a social inheritance. In that case, “white bodies must be sexually orientated toward white bodies in order to maintain their whiteness. Too much proximity with others...could threaten the reproduction of whiteness as a bodily or social attribute” (128).
2.4: The concerned audience Glenn Stanton addresses in *Why Not Gay Marriage?*
Figure 2.5: The *Why Not Gay Marriage?* audience shares a laugh with Glenn Stanton.
motherless, fatherless, and childless, therefore no family is visible. Undoubtedly Focus cannot imagine gay men as fathers. The sexual overtones of the embrace also keep us from seeing a family. And the expressions are very wrong. Neither man is smiling. The white man’s gaze is a bit off, distant and perhaps brooding. The African American man gazes into the camera, but his right brow is raised in a questioning or worried look. The sharper, darker look to the photo is very different from the bright, sunny, soft-focus look of the ideal family’s picture. In the background we see stairs, bringing to mind the urban setting of an apartment building. Would Kent Eimers place families there? The intertwined black and white skin reinforces the interracial threat of the previous image; it whispers “The interracial family made you uncomfortable, but this is way scarier!” This image not only fails to show us a family, it is clearly an “anti-family” model: thousands of studies say so!

As in the case of interracial families, a Google image search retrieves a wide array of images of smiling children with their gay or lesbian parents from which Focus could have chosen, none of which has the look of the photo Focus shows us. The results of a search for “gay men and AIDS,” however, do include that very picture. That is because the image was intended to tell a story about gay minority men and AIDS. It originally appeared in an online nursing journal March 2, 2000, with the caption: “Demographic Shift: HIV/AIDS infection rates surge among gay minority men” (see Figure 2.7). In this context, the pensive looks, the apartment steps, and the absence of children all fit. It is the frame of “motherless and fatherless homes” that gives the photo an almost sinister look.
...but thousands of studies show intentionally motherless and fatherless homes are harmful.

Demographic Shift
HIV/AIDS infection rates surge among gay minority men

Figure 2.6: Gay “family” photo from Why Not Gay Marriage?

Figure 2.7: Image in its original context on www.nurseweek.com, March 2, 2000, (Photo: Photodisc)
Returning to the context of the Focus DVD, what about these “intentionally” motherless and fatherless homes mentioned in the caption? Who creates them? Certainly Focus would say that gay and lesbian parents do, but also mothers who divorce and do not remarry, and mothers who choose not to marry in the first place. What about single dads? Teen-aged moms? Who creates UNintentionally motherless and fatherless homes? The DVD points to a very gendered understanding of marriage that may help us imagine how Focus answers these questions.

In response to question 5, “What public good does marriage provide?” Glenn Stanton answers that “natural” marriage does four primary jobs: 1) It socializes men, making them productive. Stanton says “society’s most serious problem is the unattached male.” “Marriage channels sexuality and aggression” and women “make men behave” through marriage and parenthood. 2) Marriage regulates sexuality by “establishing sexual guardrails” because, according to the accompanying booklet, “we can’t have everybody doing whatever they want sexually.” 3) It protects women from exploitive males. Stanton says in “non-monogamous cultures women become commodities.” Apparently he can count on his audience to know which cultures he means. 4) Marriage provides mothers and fathers. Note that this last remark raises the question of whether Focus believes mothers and fathers exist outside marriage, and reveals a Focus presumption that heterosexual spouses are to become parents. Note also that all four of these purposes seem geared to emphasize how marriage tames men and is presumably good for women and children, overlooking how it regulates women’s sexuality. One might ask to whom Focus is trying to sell this idea. Perhaps they do not think men need to be convinced. That question raises another: What all is at stake? What else is fragile?
In analyzing these examples of Focus on the Family rhetoric about endangered family, anxieties about the precariousness of other ideals become apparent. Firstly, privilege is at stake for many who are sounding the alarms about family—privileges of race, gender, and heteronormative sexuality and marriage.

Secondly, their religious authority is in danger. The non-religious approach of the DVD uncovers Focus on the Family’s perception of the weakness of a religious argument in swaying many people. In addition, the more society moves toward acceptance of homosexuality, the more intolerant anti-gay religious stances look, and the less they seem to hold the Truth. In Dobson’s *Marriage Under Fire*, related anxieties surface—loss of future believers, for instance. He argues that families produce children and also indoctrinate children into Christianity. Therefore, in his view, the decreasing popularity of traditional marriage and family means fewer Christians.

Thirdly, innocence may feel fragile—in two ways. First of all, the DVD seems to want to keep not just homosexuality, but sexuality in general in the closet (or at least between the guard rails). Innocence means never having to talk about sex publicly, one might guess. Second of all, the gay rights movement threatens to serve up another minority group that has been subject to prejudice whose suffering dominant society does not want to own. White middle-class males especially are struggling to deal with how they are implicated in our country’s history of discrimination against racial minorities and women.

Finally, no doubt a sense of order feels fragile. For men like James Dobson especially, it must feel as if the world is turning upside down: Kids who do not need dads? Women who do not need men? Homosexuality that is not only acknowledged
publicly, but is celebrated? When did all this change? Surely it feels like the earth is shifting beneath the feet for many who worry about the “endangered family.” Behind arguments for bolstering the family lies a sense of loss of an age of innocent naïveté, an imagined nostalgic past when right and wrong, the genders, the hierarchy of races, and American rightness seemed more clearly delineated and universally assumed. Organizations like Focus on the Family channel these fears into political activity.

**Photography and Politics**

There is a long history of photographs being used for political ends—since the invention of the camera, in fact. Much has been written about this. In *American Archives*, for instance, Shawn Michelle Smith examines how commercial and “scientific” photographs came together in the nineteenth century, not only to reflect, but also to shape a gendered and then racialized American identity, defining national belonging and exclusion. She tracks photography’s contribution in an American shift from aristocratic privilege to the cult of True Womanhood and middle-class domesticity to a post-bellum racial caste system. She refers to Walter Benjamin’s idea that the invention of a means of mechanical reproduction of photographs opened up portrait photography for an evidentiary quality, freeing it enough from its aura of sentiment to allow for its political use. Smith argues this was a two-way process that allowed family portraits to become “evidence” as well.

One of Smith’s most interesting examples of a political use of pictures is Frances Benjamin Johnston’s photographs of students at the Hampton Institute, which tell a tale of Native American and African American assimilation. The photos demonstrate a white
woman’s gaze as she tries to erase racial difference by showing the students participating in “American” rituals. Ultimately, though, they leave room for a “separate but equal” vision of both groups (176-7). In contrast, Smith details W.E.B. DuBois’ collection of photographs, *Types of American Negroes*, which challenged a visual understanding of race by its representation of a broad range of diversity among blacks. According to bell hooks, the collection “…gave us a way to see ourselves, a sense of how we looked when we were not ‘wearing the mask,’ when we were not attempting to perfect the image for a white supremacist gaze” (Smith 177-8).

Laura Wexler, in *Tender Violence*, looks at the coercive work photography does in providing models for proper behavior and appearance according to age, race, class, and sex, “not merely reflecting but actively determining the social spaces in which lives are lived” (299). She shows how photos helped “cement the regime of sentiment” along with a system of “kinship, conquest, and incorporation that it sponsored” (299). More specifically, she describes the role of women, including Frances Benjamin Johnston, in American photography in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century, and the “innocent eye” attributed to them by domestic sentiment. The “constitutive sentimental functions of the innocent eye masked and distorted” the “violence of colonial encounters” (7). She hopes through her book a “democratic vision…can be aroused in the critical eyes of…beholders” of photos that count as historical evidence, that she can “contribute to the formation of democratic counter-memory” (6).

In discussing the 1955 Museum of Modern Art exhibition *The Family of Man*, Marianne Hirsch sees the family as “an instrument of political intervention” (52). She mentions Alan Sekula’s reference to it as a “guidebook for the collapse of the political
into the familial,” and notes that “the camera, the family picture, and the family album are effective instruments of this collapse (69). The cover photos of the Focus magazine serve a similar function.

Similarly, in The Passionate Camera, Deborah Bright looks at how images of sexuality have been “used to stir and mobilize furious political and cultural campaigns” (xv). Specifically, she refers to efforts to defund the National Endowment for the Arts by stirring public outrage over controversial works. The way Focus uses the picture of the gay men is precisely in this vein. For her own part, Bright intends for the book’s collection of images and words to “challenge and disrupt the dominant social consensus around sexuality and its representations” (2).

Doss and Kozol’s books describing Life magazine are particularly relevant here. Like James Dobson, the founder of Life, Henry Luce, was a religious man. In fact, in the early decades of the Cold War, Life frequently expressed “the longing to reestablish the Christian identity of the nation as its moral backbone and purpose in the world” (Morgan 153). Wendy Kozol notes that representations of American families in Life magazine in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s contributed to notions that social problems were the victims’ fault, a natural result of people’s refusal to conform to middle-class family ideals (183-4).

Focus on the Family continues these themes, and has gotten increasingly adept at using them politically. In fact, at least part of the motivation behind its anti-gay pro-marriage messages is certainly the recognition of its power to “organize and mobilize conservative Christian constituents and raise money” (Erzen 199). Lisa Duggan and Richard Kim describe the appeal in this way:
“Such initiatives appeal simultaneously to fiscal conservatives who see promoting marriage as a way to reduce state dependency, anti-gay voters who quail at the notion of same-sex unions, right-wing Christians who seek to enforce biblically determined family law and the mass of voters anxious about the instability of marriage. Conservatives have found a way to finesse their differences through a comprehensive and reactionary program that aims to enshrine the conjugal family as the sole legally recognized household structure.” (1)

Of note is the fact that “gay marriage is the single issue trending against increasing support for gay rights” (Duggan and Kim 2).

Jakobsen and Pellegrini argue in Love the Sin that there is already an established state family form, that current regulations bestow a variety of privileges on those who choose the traditional familial arrangements, not the least of which is sexual freedom:

Sexual regulations are not just about sex. By regulating sex, the state attempts to regulate family life and American social relations...the state actually defines what counts as family. Regulation becomes a form of recognition for those who fit into the category of “family.” ... Family solves the sex problem. It is supposed to domesticate sexuality without its participants having entirely to give up on the American discourse of freedom. In its idealized form, the family is free from government interference, because family matters, including sexual relations, are supposed to be protected by privacy. (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 7)

They argue for the disestablishment of the privileged family form, saying

“democracy has to mean more than coercive homogeneity” (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 149).

[T]he state should not and need not be in the business of endorsing any particular familial form (and then calling it “the family”). The state should be neutral with regard to familial form. However, this disestablishment in no way requires the state to withdraw from its important supporting role in providing the necessary means of sustenance—healthcare, child care, ensuring a living wage, adequate housing—for its citizens. All these are the necessary prerequisites for
freedom, including the freedom to form intimate relations of our own choosing. (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 143-4)

Neutrality feels unfair, however, to those who have enjoyed the privileged taken-for-granted-ness of being part of the dominant culture (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 118), which is a large part of why Focus on the Family followers feel threatened by demographic changes. Their focus on the nuclear family as the answer makes the problems feel more manageable, but it also steers attention away from other factors involved in these recent changes and from considering social or community solutions that might be more productive. Duggan and Kim describe the strategy this way:

The “threat” of gay marriage enabled them to portray marital households as under assault (from homosexuals and judges) without addressing any of the economic factors that put marital households under stress and without directly attacking any of the related legal and social transformations (no-fault divorce, new reproductive technologies, women in the workplace) that most Americans would be reluctant to reject. (4)

The endangered-family campaign, then, needs to be carefully analyzed. Who and what does this rhetoric render invisible? It obscures families as they really are—“normal” families, who often have lots of problems, and those in alternative household arrangements (which do not get coded as “family”) who often have successes. But the bigger danger is the invisibility of truly fragile families, those without social or financial resources.

The reality is that Focus on the Family is correct in perceiving that the traditional family is in danger in that the percentage of households with that arrangement is decreasing. Duggan and Kim explain that “marital reproductive households are no longer in the majority, and most Americans spend half their adult lives outside marriage” (2).
What needs to be questioned is whether a particular way of doing family is the best choice for everyone. If we set aside assumptions about traditional family, we can more accurately examine the specific circumstances of households in precarious financial straits, and consider potential solutions in that light.

_Fragile Families and the Marriage Agenda_ explores some of these assumptions and solutions. For example, in “Family Structure and Child Well-Being: The Role of Parental Social Connections,” Dunifon and Kowaleski-Jones argue that the presence of a grandparent in the home of children being reared by a single parent makes all the difference in whether delinquency becomes a problem (Kowaleski-Jones and Wolfinger 107-127). In an essay by Sara S. McLanahan that shares the title of the book, she provides arguments in support of the Bush Administration’s one-and-a-half-billion-dollar program to promote “healthy marriages.” But even she questions assumptions about whether children born to unmarried parents would be better off if their parents wed, noting other factors that affect relevant statistics such as education, financial security, age, domestic conflict and violence, drugs and alcohol (Kowaleski-Jones and Wolfinger 16-19). Meanwhile, Moon and Whitehead conclude in “Marrying for America” that Bush’s policies mask financial policy alternatives such as “increasing state revenue through a more progressive tax structure, or dismantling components of the American system for which poverty is both inevitable and essential” (Kowaleski-Jones and Wolfinger 41). They also find his policies mask alternative family arrangements, rendering “unthinkable alternatives such as community parenting, or parenting and family structures not organized by sexual desires between men and women, and the like—even if, as some have argued, these alternatives might avoid the problems of
isolation and gender hierarchy fostered by traditional marriage arrangements (Kowalseski-Jones and Wolfinger 42).

Alternative arrangements arise from people’s opting for marrying later; cohabitating couples; living alone; multigenerational, nonmarital households, elderly included; and companionate nonconjugal unions (like Golden Girls). Furthermore, “household diversity is a fact of American life rooted not just in the ‘cultural’ revolutions of feminism and gay liberation but in long-term changes in aging, housing, childcare and labor” (Duggan and Kim 2).

Duggan and Kim see the need for a major social movement “committed to household diversity as a primary political goal” (Duggan and Kim 4). Proponents should “…reframe the marriage debate” with “a broad vision of social justice that resonates on many fronts” and can “connect this democratization of household recognition with advocacy of material support for caretaking, as well as for good jobs and adequate benefits (like universal healthcare), then what we all have in common will come into sharper relief” (Duggan and Kim 4). Constituencies might include young adults, single parents, the elderly, caregivers, major corporations, and labor unions (Duggan and Kim 5). When we let go of assumptions about familial forms, many arrangements and solutions present themselves, opening new collaborative relationships.

In closing, let’s return briefly to the Focus on the Family photographs and Kent Eimers’ photographic philosophy. The fragility of family they represent is complex. We must sort out the idea of endangered family from that of endangered privilege. Although the traditional family may be statistically fragile, the power of its mythology is still strong—especially in its visual images. Just as we want to trust Eimers’ promise that he
can make our families look perfect and happy, we want to believe in the promise that, if
done properly, family might actually bring perfect happiness—for individuals and for
society as a whole. We must bring a skeptical gaze to our national family album and
think carefully about who we are excluding, why, and to what ends.

Revisiting Hirsch’s thought that “the ideology of the family is as much subject to
particular historical, social, and economic circumstances as the lived reality of family
life” (8) reminds us that although it seems natural and timeless, what constitutes family is
always fluid. Knowing this can help us re-frame our mental picture of family, along with
our expectations. It is not that the family is endangered so much as the fact that how
people arrange it may be changing. Acknowledging that frees us to “unbundle sex and
money” as Jakobsen and Pellegrini put it (141-2). To disestablish a particular one-brand-
fits-all form of family makes space for us to match solutions to actual circumstances for
households in need of social and financial resources.
CHAPTER 3

BRANDING AND ANTI-BRANDING IN MAINLINE DENOMINATIONAL CHURCHES

There is an authentic spiritual impulse at the heart of our branding economy. We use brands to do identity work for us, finally, out of our desire to be recognised by others, by a power greater than ourselves; and the desire to recognise and know others, to commune with others under a power greater than ourselves.

–Unknown, quoted in Consuming Faith: Integrating Who We Are with What We Buy

You’re driving along and you hear this commercial on the radio:

Woman: Let’s play a little word association game. Say what comes to mind when I say...soul.
Man: Stevie Wonder, James Brown, Marvin Gaye.
Woman: ...the afterlife.
Man: X-files, Stephen King, Ghostbusters.
Woman: Hmmm...Hail, Mary.
Man: Touchdown!
Woman: Jesus Christ.
Man: Jesus Christ! Would you look at that great parking spot!
Woman: Thou shalt not...
Man: --pass go! Thou shalt not collect $200. Thou shalt not swim thirty minutes after...
Woman: (chuckle...)
Announcer Voice: Maybe it’s not the first thing on your mind, but there comes a time when it’s time to get a life—a spiritual life. When you’re ready to start thinking about yours, think about the Presbyterian Church (USA)...here and now.

You might be surprised at a religious ad’s light-hearted treatment of words that are usually taken pretty seriously in church. You might wonder what is going on with the

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Presbyterian Church. However, this is not the only example of a denominational ad with an un-churchy tone.

Within every denomination there are theologically conservative and liberal factions (Warner 75). Considering ever-changing demographics, and the individual differences and independence of modern Protestant congregations, religious categories can be slippery and inexact. Nevertheless, it is clear that there has been a decided loss of members—whole congregations, in fact—from mainline liberal Christian denominations, and a dramatic increase in conservative Protestant congregations since 1965 (Warner 56). It makes sense, then, that these traditional denominations are trying to recapture lost membership and income through “outreach” efforts.

It is not terribly surprising that they are using today’s mass media to market their product to potential customers. More specifically, some are engaged in identity branding campaigns portraying themselves as relevant, welcoming places with much to offer young adults and families. At the same time, they are naturally aware of communicating to their current membership as well. According to Wuthnow, the identity-conferring function of churches is all the more important because so many of the other functions have eroded (1993, 45).

I argue that these campaigns are, at least in part, a response to a more religiously conservative media presence of ideas like those of Focus on the Family featured in chapter 2. In fact, at least three denominational media campaigns go beyond branding and extending an invitation to attend their churches, and, to varying degrees, use their ads to distinguish themselves from the moralistic, exclusivistic image of the religious right—what I call “anti-branding.” Further, I argue that mainline liberal denominations have
traditionally played an important role in American society, and these campaigns represent an attempt to reclaim that role and their voice in today’s cultural discourse on families and the meaning of family values. Narrative and visual images of families and the organizations’ welcome of an array of types of families play prominently in these campaigns. These depictions evoke an egalitarian vision of moral order that opens the concept of citizenship to all people and which is distinct from that implied by Focus on the Family images.

The Great Divide

An analysis of themes and elements in the ads supports the argument that one of their purposes is to distance the organizations from conservative religious stereotypes. All three campaigns strongly communicate acceptance, what is referenced in United Church of Christ instructional materials as “radical, inclusive, non-judgmental embrace.” Not only do they highlight a multicultural array of African Americans and people from various classes and ethnicities, they also challenge conservative definitions of gender and family in their portrayal of women, gays, and single parents as positive, strong characters. In addition, the use of humor in two of the campaigns redefines the distinction between sacred and profane, as shown above. From this perspective, the ads seem to use mass media to directly engage religious conservatism. Before examining the ad campaigns more closely, it would be useful to look at the historical context that gave rise to a decline in mainline denomination membership, as well as today’s split between religious conservatism and liberalism. These divisions are part of what informs current identity branding of liberal and conservative Protestant organizations.
It is important to understand that religion has always been more competitive in the United States than most places because of our defiant individualism, the First Amendment disestablishment clause, and separation of church and state. “Denominationalism and interfaith division [are] distinctive and consequential features of American religion” (Wuthnow 1988 72). “We may be individualists, but our individualism is demonstrated as much by where we choose to join as in launching out on our own” (Ammerman 1996 13). Protestants especially participate in a marketplace of religions because congregations are organized around sharing common ideas. In other words a Protestant can choose to worship with any congregation he or she feels is a good fit, called congregationalism. On the other hand, Catholic parishes are organized by geography, at least in theory (Warner 67-9). American Protestant churches, then, have always had to convince people to provide financial support (Hendershot 29).

Some changes in congregational affiliation began soon after the Scopes trial in 1925. Some conservatives moved toward a separatist fundamentalism. Nevertheless, mainline denominational loyalties were still strong, and they continued to grow, peaking in 1958. Mergers in the 1950s and 1960s stimulated dissent. Some dissidents branched off to form smaller conservative denominations; some formed special purpose groups; some churches remained within what came to be thought of as liberal denominations; and some chose congregational independence (Ammerman 1998 82-3; Wuthnow 1988 141-159).

The 1960s brought many changes with the social unrest due to the Viet Nam War and the civil rights movement, and religious leaders could not remain quiet. As they spoke up, conservative members were increasingly uncomfortable, feeling that direct
action was too conflictual. They preferred “…changing individuals’ conscience…rather than engaging directly in social activism” (Wuthnow 1988 148).

Meanwhile, other trends served to further polarize conservative and liberal viewpoints. A huge growth in population beginning after World War II meant more young people. Government investment in science and technology, and in higher education, combined with a growing economy, resulted in a rush to higher education. At the same time, the population was shifting to cities and suburbs, and migration between regions of the country increased significantly. Not surprisingly, the 1960s also brought some changes in values and attitudes, characterized by a sense of egalitarianism: a greater tolerance and support for civil liberties; latitude in notions about gender roles, divorce, and sex; and public interest in welfare, social services, and the environment (Wuthnow 1988 155-6).

Social activism brought cooperation among various faiths and denominations. This, along with greater internal diversity, resulted in an increase in denominational switching and a decrease in denominational prejudice (Wuthnow 1988 156, 166). Even as many more educated people, especially young people, left all denominations, the percentage of college-educated in liberal denominations went up. A divide opened within congregations between the more educated congregants and similarly educated clergy versus the conservative and less educated (Wuthnow 1988 161). Previously, denominations were divided along regional, ethnic, and doctrinal lines, but beginning in the 1960s, the split was increasingly along education lines, working across denominations and cutting through church organizations (Wuthnow 1988 163).
At the same time, evangelicalism gained popularity. The formation of the National Association of Evangelicals in 1943 grew from the feeling that denominational structure was too bureaucratic, and in some cases too secular. Evangelicals pragmatically avoided sectarianism and theological strife in favor of institution building and evangelizing, forming ties with business and community leaders, and keeping a clear focus and identity (Wuthnow 1988 176). To avoid the extremism of the fundamentalism of the 1920s, they kept to a centrist path, so the left and right coexisted (Wuthnow 1988 188). Additionally, membership in conservative sects and denominations grew because of aggressive evangelism, high fertility rates, and successful retention of their young people (Wuthnow 1988 183).

Since 1965, mainline liberal congregations have been disappearing. Between 1965 and 1987, nearly 13,000 congregations left six liberal denominations: American Baptist, Episcopal, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, and United Church of Christ. They were replaced by more than 13,000 additional congregations of six conservative denominations: Assemblies of God, Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee), Jehovah’s Witness, Latter-day Saints, Nazarene, and Seventh-Day Adventists (Warner 56). About 47% of the congregations founded before 1900 consider themselves “liberal” or “moderate,” while 68% founded since 1970 label themselves “conservative” or “very conservative” (Warner 57).

In addition to the Viet Nam War protest and the civil rights movement, the sexual revolution and elimination of school prayer further separated people into liberal and conservative camps. The 1970s brought new divisive issues: Roe v. Wade, the struggle for ratification of the equal rights amendment, and the first inkling of AIDS awareness.
(Wuthnow 1993 140-3; Hendershot 26-7). When the moral upheaval of the 1970s erupted, messages of certainty and clarity became for some a haven where life made sense (Ammerman 1998 106).

Lesage notes that an environment of little denominational hierarchy “…puts a premium on aggressive, entrepreneurial leaders who can successfully compete for money, followers, and publicity with the world” (35). Nowhere is that more evident than in the rise of electronic media as tools for evangelizing. Initially, mainline denominations had a privileged free access to radio networks, which forced independent religions to pay for airtime and use independent stations. Eventually, the revivalist tradition gave way to ministries dedicated to broadcasting. The revivalists developed nationally organized businesses, and seized the opportunity to use radio to publicize and sttr excitement.

The major denominations were slow to shake the mindset of entitlement to free airtime. In 1960, when the FCC changed the rules for networks’ public-interest obligations, airtime went to the highest bidder. Over time, mainlines were not able to compete with the National Religious Broadcasters producers, which portrayed an evangelical world view (Ammerman 1998 87).

“Television ministries, then, became one of the important new forces shaping American religion in the 1970s,” giving rise to new megachurches and a new religious right by the end of the decade (Wuthnow 1988 197). They provided a strong platform for conservative preachers; unlike the established denominations, with “…virtually no controls from the outside…these pastors were free to use their vast resources for virtually any activity the local market would bear” (Wuthnow 1988 197). The electronic churches of the 1980s brought a “…political economic order in which the stakes were collective
identities, cultural ideas, and symbols as well as profits, markets, political power, and lost souls" (Harding 258).

Mainline denominations once would have considered TV advertising shameless self-promotion. “Unlike their evangelic counterparts, these churches have taken a low-key approach to recruitment to show sensitivity toward others’ religious beliefs” (MacDonald 3). Or more accurately, their “selling” took a different form other than TV ads (Hendershot 29-30). Declining membership has made advertising a necessity, however.

Competition, then, has forced mainline liberal denominations to adopt new strategies. In fact, they have taken up some of the same tactics used by televangelists. Some of the new commercial campaigns, for instance, are based on an emotional appeal, similar to Frankl’s description of Pat Robertson’s strategies with programming on the Family Channel, “…entering the heart first, and then the mind” (176).

THREE MEDIA CAMPAIGNS

Although the media campaigns examined here—those of the United Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church (USA), and the United Church of Christ—have similar themes and messages, they also have distinct personalities of their own, just like the denominations themselves. The United Church of Christ, for instance, is proud of its heritage of social activism, fierce independence, and local autonomy. Born from the merging in 1957 of the liberal traditions of the Congregational, Christian, and Reformed Churches, and the Evangelical Synod, it is equally proud of its ordination of “firsts:” the first African American ordained by a predominantly white denomination (1785); the first
woman ordained (1853); and the first openly gay person ordained (1972). From this tradition, Yale, Harvard, and U.C. Berkley were founded (Wuthnow 1988 149; Stillspeaking Initiative Chapter 1). The United Church of Christ takes liberal stands on social issues, including two of the most difficult for churches today, gay marriage and abortion. While recognizing differences of opinion among its members, the web site unequivocally advocates in favor of gay marriage and a woman’s right to make reproductive decisions(ucc.org/justice).

The Presbyterian positions on abortion and homosexuality reflect a compromise of conflicting opinions. The denomination affirms the sanctity of life and also respect for women’s ability and right to make moral decisions, condoning abortion as a last resort (pcusa.org/whoweare). The Presbyterian Church comes from a reform tradition by way of John Calvin. Presbyterian ministers, such as Jonathan Edwards and Gilbert Tennent, were driving forces in the "Great Awakening," a revivalist movement in the early 18th century. Presbyterians founded the “log college” that eventually became Princeton. Today’s Presbyterian Church (USA) was created by the 1983 reunion of the two main branches of Presbyterians in America, which were separated during the Civil War. One of the two branches, the United Presbyterian Church in the USA, had been created by the 1958 merger of the Presbyterian Church in the USA and the United Presbyterian Church of North America (Wuthnow 1988 149; pcusa.org/whoweare). They adopted a new confession stressing social concerns and liberal theology in 1967 (Wuthnow 1988 149).

The United Methodist Church arose from the ministries of the Wesley brothers and a tradition of lay ministers. John Wesley espoused knowing God through scripture, tradition, personal experience, and reason, in that order of importance. An African
American, Rich Allen, left the Methodist Church in 1816 to form the African American Episcopal Church, and the north and south segments of the church split in 1944. In 1968, the Evangelical United Brethren and Methodist Churches merged to form the United Methodists (Wuthnow 1988 149; www.umc.org/history). The United Brethren ordained a woman in 1889, but full clergy rights for women were lost in the merger until 1956. The official position of the United Methodist Church on abortion and homosexuality, like those of the Presbyterian Church, shows signs of internal struggles and differences of opinion. It states that homosexuality is “incompatible with Christianity” but homosexuals are “individuals of sacred worth.” There is tolerance for abortion with reservations, and strong affirmation of the equality of women and men, specifically including single parents in statements about family (www.umc.org/). As a point of comparison, the Assemblies of God almost mirrors the positions of the United Church of Christ, stating strong opposition to abortion and homosexuality, but making a distinction between hating the sin while loving the sinner.

The campaigns of all three liberal denomination churches have a stated goal to instill a sense of pride among current members, and all use accepting, inclusive messaging, much of which is couched in terms of families and exclusions that are often encoded in images of traditional families (i.e., white, heterosexual, middle-class, patriarchal). For example, they all display diversity of family forms, race, gender, ages, and class. For the most part, they have an everyday, folksy, unchurch-y tone to them. In survey responses, congregants from all three denominations were obviously pleased, and confirmed that the welcoming messages resonated with them. Comments included: “I’m proud to be affiliated with the United Church of Christ.” The ad sends the message that
“...we are an unconditionally loving, accepting church.” One church employee on seeing the ad for the first time on TV remembers excitedly exclaiming, “That’s my church!”

All three campaigns carefully state an intent to reach “un-churched” people, or people who are looking for a new church. Like Focus on the Family’s DVD, these campaigns are at least in part about the replication of certain kinds of values and ideas about the family. The ads are meant to appeal to an ethnically diverse population, likely with an eye toward attracting immigrants who have not yet chosen a church. Similarly, the ads target an age range of roughly 25 to 45 years old in the hope that they can rebuild that demographic within their congregations. Women are expected to be most responsive, although all three campaigns have pieces that seem whole-heartedly geared for men as well.

The Presbyterian ad messages refer to transition points in life, “...times when the likes of marriage, childbirth, and career changes bring problems that lead people to reassess their priorities and seek spiritual support” (pcusa.org). For example, the Presbyterian television commercial, “Rugby,” depicts a group of middle-aged guys playing rough and tumble rugby complete with thuds, ooofs, and grunts, accompanied by music with a strong beat. Meanwhile, a male voice says, “One day all of a sudden it hits you—you’re 39. And you’re not invincible. When you’re ready, there’s a church...here and now.” Similarly, their TV ad, “Baby,” shows a woman in labor, with sounds of her efforts in the background as a man says, “Ten years ago it was your boyfriend, your clothes, your weekends.” We hear the baby cry, then see her, as the voiceover continues, “Now it’s Jennifer, Jennifer, Jennifer. When you’re ready, there’s a church...here and now.”
A close look at the three campaigns reveals they are also striving to portray their churches as accepting places, to distinguish themselves from churches that seem judgmental. The most blatant example of this is in the United Church of Christ ad, “The Bouncer,” in which two burly, nightclub bouncer-type men stand at the entrance to a church barring entry to all but the approved few—notably a young, white, nicely-dressed traditional “mom, dad, two children” family. Turned away are a gay couple, a young Hispanic man, a young African American woman, and a young man in a casual blue shirt. The scene switches to a very diverse group—people of different genders, ages, races, sexual preferences, and a person in a wheelchair—like a family photo. The camera gives a close-up view of most of them as the voice-over says, “Jesus didn’t turn people away. Neither do we. The United Church…of Christ. No matter who you are, or where you are in life’s journey, you’re welcome here.”

This is by far the most pointed of the ads, in that it has a dark, edgy tone, is set explicitly in front of a church, complete with church bells ringing, and it overtly depicts gays being excluded. It is not exactly a veiled message. In fact, CBS and NBC declined the commercial because they felt it was too controversial (God Is Still Speaking). Some United Church of Christ members surveyed about this commercial feel it comes dangerously close to being as judgmental as those churches the ad is meant to parody. A sampling of survey remarks include the following: “It has a we/they-type feeling.” “It’s too abrasive for me.” “It doesn’t leave me with the same proud feelings.” There are also some who object to the ad because of their disagreement with the church’s stand on homosexuality. One United Church of Christ minister with whom I spoke said a colleague told him it offended him for that reason. On the other hand, some UCC
congregants found it very thought-provoking, calling it “…an attention grabber!” and saying, “It makes you think.”

Similarly, but less strikingly, the Presbyterian radio ads, “Check Out” and “Disclaimer,” poke fun at judgmental attitudes. They both begin with church organ music to orient the listener to who is doing the judging. Here’s “Check Out”:

Male voice: Let’s see, I have you down for two taking the Lord’s name in vain, three counts of impure thoughts while watching lingerie commercials, indulging in foosball and other sinful amusements, excessive colorful language in traffic, making fun of your boss’s bald spot, skipping church to watch a *Three Stooges* marathon, willfully and maliciously leaving the toilet seat up, fourteen lies: ten white, four unspecified. Is that it?

Other male voice: Parking in a handicapped spot? Coveting my neighbor’s lawn and garden equipment?

Announcer voice: Your spiritual journey doesn’t have to be a guilt trip. Not with the Presbyterian Church. It doesn’t claim to have all the answers, but it can help with the big questions. Presbyterian Church/USA…here and now.

“The campaign seeks to use messages that surprise the audience with the contemporary relevance, understanding and welcoming nature of the Presbyterian Church (USA)…bold…so as to avoid being perceived as an old, stuffy, out-of-touch denomination” (Presbyterian Church 1).

The United Methodist Church ads have a gentler tone, and offer more theologically traditional messaging than the other two campaigns. The subtle positive portrayal of single parenthood in “Daughter Sleeping” (see Figure 3-1) could be construed as an oblique jab at conservative churches’ strong privileging of traditional families. This is a print ad showing a little girl sleeping and these words:
Figure 3.1: "Daughter Sleeping," a print ad used in "Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors" campaign.
Last night, I watched my daughter sleeping. Smelling of soap and tangle-free shampoo. And suddenly the responsibility of preparing that little human being for the world was overwhelming. I’m 36 and single. And I am strong. That’s why I’m here.

Additionally, though the ad is not currently on the United Methodist Church website, the “2003 Annual Report” describes an ad that won an ADDY\(^5\) award in 2003. “Duct Tape” refers to the government recommendation that citizens seal windows and doors in case of terrorist attack at the beginning of the war in Iraq:

Two months ago, it was just duct tape (shows image of a roll of tape). And some day, hopefully soon, it will just be duct tape again. Along with the world, the people of the United Methodist Church are praying—for understanding, for healing, for peace. (6-7)

The report goes on to explain that this ad fit with the United Methodist Church “…post-9/11 strategy of using prayer as a reminder that fear is not the only force at work in the world today” (6-7).

Furthermore, the 2004 report lists these statements as reflecting the intended communication of the United Methodist Church ads: United Methodists would accept you for who you are; United Methodists accept people from different walks; United Methodists show respect for other religions; United Methodists welcome diverse opinions/beliefs (9). All of these point toward a message of acceptance and non-judgment.

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\(^5\) According to the American Advertising Federation (AAF) web site, the ADDY® Awards are the world’s largest advertising competition with over 60,000 entries annually. The AAF is a not-for-profit industry association that conducts the ADDY® Awards through its 200 member advertising clubs, recognizing “all forms of advertising from media of all types, creative by all sizes and entrants of all levels from anywhere in the world” ([www.aaf.org](http://www.aaf.org)).
A few of the United Church of Christ and Presbyterian Church (USA) ads also project a hipness and irreverence that set them apart from more conservative church attitudes. For example, the United Church of Christ’s radio ad, “Some of Yc Faithful” puts a very light-hearted and humorous twist on a familiar, traditional Christmas carol: “Oh come, some of ye faithful, powerful and privileged…” The Presbyterian Church’s “Check Out,” with its clever, “Your spiritual journey doesn’t have to be a guilt trip,” and “Disclaimer,” with its silly “thou shalt nots,” are equally light-hearted. After listing about thirty “commandments,” like “Thou shalt not dance…attract any attention…go out for a drink…drive a nice car…rock out…,” “Disclaimer” ends with, “Here’s a new concept: a church where the most important commandments are still the original ten.” It also features a record scratching sound, which is very “today,” and is likely to resonate with the sought-after young demographic. The use of “Jesus Christ” in “Word Association,” described above, would certainly raise eyebrows in most conservative churches, and some not so conservative as well. Even the title/tag line of the Presbyterian Church campaign is very “here and now.”

The United Church of Christ has a unique branding problem in that United Church of Christ and Church of Christ sound very much alike. Ironically, the two churches are very different. For example, a Church of Christ web site poses and then answers this question:

Some are discouraged from becoming a Christian because they look at all the different denominations in the world and realize they can’t all be right. Therefore, they feel lost and never try to discover the truth. Why are there so many denominations in the world?

Denominations arise because of man’s own sinfulness. They are contrary to the will of God. Denominationalism teaches that it is
impossible for us to agree on everything so we should denominate ourselves into groups of Christians who have our own beliefs. Paul condemned this attitude...The correct church will worship in the correct way...teach the correct doctrine on salvation...” (Church of Christ 3-4).

To make matters worse, the United Church of Christ is the result of a 1957 merger of Congregational Christians and Evangelical and Reformed traditions, and many United Church of Christ churches still keep their original names (MacDonald 12). To emphasize the difference, and create a stronger identity, the ads employ a pause between “United Church” and “of Christ.” According to Ron Buford, coordinator of the UCC campaign, this serves to emphasize the idea of unity harking back to the denominations’ merging in 1957, Church of Christ opinions to the contrary notwithstanding (Stillspeaking Initiative Chapter 4).

A FOURTH CAMPAIGN: BRANDING SALVATION

Overall, the three campaigns are warm, funny, gentle, evocative invitations. In contrast, the “God gives hope” ad campaign for Assemblies of God is more straightforward, with a more overtly traditional and evangelical message. Men, women, and a variety of race and ethnic faces are represented among the images, although interestingly no women’s voices are heard. In the commercial, “Relationships,” for example, a young couple with a vaguely ethnic look are shown in various settings arguing, interspersed with images of a wedding ring and the couple smiling together in a photo. As the wife gets into a car, the husband is shown calling from the porch, “Honey, don’t go.” A male announcer voice, with contemporary music in the background, dramatically says:
They were told it was useless. There were too many conflicts. And the memories would always follow. Forgiveness was unlikely. And trust could never be restored. They were told they’d be better off to leave the marriage.

Then, as the wife comes in the front door with a suitcase, he continues: “But they didn’t listen. They found hope. God gives hope. A message from the Assemblies of God.”

Clearly the spot advocates for keeping a marriage together, but more subtle is the implication that a woman should not leave her husband.

Another commercial, “Addiction,” opens with the image of a middle-aged African American man and a glass of liquor. The same dramatic voice narrates: “He was told once you’re in, you can’t get out. The addiction was impossible to break. It grips you, strangling every ounce of hope, dignity, self-worth.” The scene changes to show a celebration of the man’s recognition as the salesperson of the month: “But he didn’t listen. He found hope. God gives hope. A message from the Assemblies of God.”

A third television commercial, “Healing,” depicts a white woman in her 50s walking, and playing with her grandchildren with this voiceover, in serious tones: “She was told she wouldn’t live past 50. The disease had progressed too far. No more games. No more greetings. And no more memories to create.” The scene changes to a celebration of her 56th birthday: “But she didn’t listen. She found hope. God gives hope. A message from the Assemblies of God.”

The Assemblies of God radio ads deal with concepts rather than situations. The themes include eternity, hopelessness, messages, unforgiveness, and brokenness. They all employ the same announcer voice as the TV commercials. As a sample, here is “Eternity”: 
Eternity. Time with no end. The human mind struggles at the thought of it—where will we spend it? And what will it be like? For many, the thought of an eternal afterlife is terrifying. It doesn’t have to be. You can know your future. You can have peace. There is a way. God gives hope. A message from the Assemblies of God.

Boiled down, one might summarize the overall messages of the Assemblies of God campaign as “God can help you, whatever your problem is,” with an undertone of, “You need God because people are sinful and weak, and in need of salvation.” The differences are, in part, subjective differences in use of language, as described by Wuthnow (1993 105). Clearly these ads, like those of the first three churches, are meant to appeal to a wide variety of ages, races, and ethnicities, but it is curious that no white men are shown needing God’s help or hope.

While the ads convey a desire to help people in various hopeless-feeling situations, there is clearly a different flavor from the theme of acceptance that runs throughout the other three campaigns. Under “concerns,” the Assemblies of God website derides “…a steady drumbeat of support for toleration….” And in answer to the question: “Why doesn’t the Assemblies of God accept non-Christian religions as valid means of salvation and access to God?” is the answer, “This, without apology, is a claim to the exclusive nature of the Christian message.”

The Presbyterian “Here and Now” and the United Church of Christ “God is still speaking” campaigns started in 2004. The United Methodist Church “Igniting Ministry” campaign, with the “Open hearts, open minds, open doors” theme, began in 2000. With enough history to draw some conclusions about the effectiveness of its ads, the United Methodist Church website in 2004 included an analysis of the campaign’s success to date. The United Methodist Church charted a 9% rise in total attendance during the first
four years of the campaign. In addition, there was overwhelming support among clergy and laity to continue to fund the campaign (United Methodist Church 2004 27).

According to Mindy Marchal in 2004, in the Presbyterian General Assembly Council Office of Communication, its preliminary data indicated the “Here and Now” campaign was eliciting the hoped-for response, a sense of pride among current members, and positive image among “unchurched” people. At that time they had already re-made most of the ads in Spanish for trial along the Texas-Mexico border. They hoped to start a campaign to reach 15- to 25-year-olds next. On negative church media images, she commented, “We don’t blame the media for that perception, but some of the denominations themselves.”

Kathy Jones, who had been involved in campaign-related training for United Church of Christ, commented in 2004 that it has generated excitement and helped raise awareness of denominational identity. According to the UCC web site in 2004, the decision had been made to run the two TV commercials nationally during the Lenten season, just as they ran during Advent.

A review of the media campaigns of these three liberal denominations leads one to draw several conclusions. It appears they aim to attract young, progressive people from a diverse array of racial and ethnic backgrounds, or at least a group who highly value diversity. They are appealing to people for whom the narrow definition of gender and family presented by conservatives does not work. They apparently perceive that at least a portion of these potential members appreciate sharp humor, even when it moves the boundaries between sacred and profane. Finally, despite the droves of people who have been drawn to an exclusive notion of Christianity, these ads point to an assumption
that there are still many people for whom an inclusive, tolerant, ecumenical approach is preferred. In short, these ads seem to be aimed at reclaiming the young, educated demographic, the very group lost during the 1960s. Further, collectively they seem to speak to the conservative “family values” rhetoric with a broader understanding of family. They recognize an array of household arrangements as legitimate, which is in keeping with an egalitarian vision of moral order.

In carving out a new liberal religious identity in the media, it is incumbent on these denominations to be cautious about fueling polarity. They will need to be cautious about alienating moderates in their existing congregations if they do not want to lose them. There is no doubt some thought of that already. For example, the more provocative radio ads are not included in the national campaigns, and can easily be targeted to young listeners who appreciate the humor.

The distinctions between denominations may not be clear cut enough to elicit strong denominational loyalty. Nevertheless, these campaigns show a clear choice exists for people who want to participate in organized religion but reject conservative religious ideals. Moreover, with religion’s role in today’s political discourse, civil society could use a religious counter balance. The mainline denominations’ bureaucracy and structure provide more checks and balances than organizations with fewer controls. Evidence of this is in the careful statements of the Presbyterian and Methodist positions on sensitive issues. Without such controls, grass roots passions can erupt into hysteria, as we have witnessed in some religious anti-abortion groups. In this time of polarity, such buffers are very important.
Wuthnow suggests we embrace difference and work on healing the liberal-conservative gap. He recommends face-to-face encounters, the opportunities for which abound in churches, especially urban churches, as well as college campuses, and in seminaries (1996 51-64). Authentic exchange can be very disarming. We need to routinely expose our ideas to self-evaluation, as well as the criticism of others. Mainline liberal denominations may be in a good position to serve in this role. “In a relativistic world, Christianity may have to be sophisticated in the same way that art or music or the theater are sophisticated, not by claiming to be the unique expression of divine truth, but by somehow convincing its audiences that they have been close to greatness when they have participated in it” (1996 94).

Overwhelming evidence for the power of such experiences emerges from the history of a United Methodist church examined in the next chapter. In keeping with their vision of their church as guided by reason, justice, and equality, members of this church formally decided in 1998 to affirm the “full and equal participation” of gay and lesbian and all church members. Since that time, they have made a point of being welcoming and accepting to all—especially those who have felt marginalized by the church. Authentic, face-to-face exchange among congregants from traditional, gay and lesbian, and other non-traditional family arrangements has, over the past decade, produced a transformation in how this congregation defines “family” and “family values.”
CHAPTER 4

BRANDING ACCEPTANCE: AFFECTIVE ACTIVISM AND THE CHRISTIAN RITE

Preach the Gospel at all times. Use words if necessary.
---St. Francis of Assisi

Even people who have never set foot inside King Avenue United Methodist Church have taken note of the huge banner that hangs on the bell tower and its message: “All are welcome. Experience inclusiveness as God intended” (see Figure 4.1). Among current attendees with whom I spoke in the course of my ethnographic study at King Avenue, virtually all made reference to the banner in talking about the church. For newcomers, it is often what enticed them to attend for the first time—many of whom have felt rejected or hurt or confused by exclusions in mainstream Christianity. The idea of the banner arose in part from the fact that members of this church decided in 1998 to be intentional in extending a welcome to those who are marginalized, especially those who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender (often shortened to GLBT at King Avenue as elsewhere). In fact, some of my gay interviewees read the banner as “GLBT welcome here.” So the church has effectively “branded” itself as accepting and welcoming to all. Does the church live up to this promise of welcome? Apparently so, because church membership has doubled since 1998, and for those with whom I spoke,
the answer is definitely yes. In fact, they consistently described acceptance at King Avenue as “tangible.”

King Avenue takes the message of acceptance expressed in the national mainline denominational media campaigns to a new level. King Avenue’s branding campaign explicitly puts not mere passive acceptance, but ardent welcome, at the very heart of its identity through the use of the banner. The branding continues in the congregation’s worship practices. Just as a larger-than-life vinyl banner brands an old, traditional building as housing those who subscribe to the most contemporary ideals of acceptance by making reference to an ancient God’s intentions, I argue that, through a variety of
traditional practices, the King Avenue United Methodist Church congregation is successfully branding homosexual relationships as “family,” and self-identified GLBT bodies, and thereby homosexuality itself, as accepted within the church. Further, I see this branding as an intentional reshaping of the social imaginary, what I call “affective activism.” An embodied approach to examining church practices shows that those who regularly attend King Avenue are continually molding their own moral imagination, which they accomplish not so much through overt activity, but rather it emerges from routine worship customs. In embracing these changes, members of this congregation, along with others in the “welcoming” church movement, contribute to a shift in the social imaginary of the larger church. I assert this affective activism is as effectual a catalyst for change as conventional activism in the tradition of church-led social justice movements.

**King Avenue and the Welcoming Church Movement**

Why do people who believe in equal rights for gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered people (GLBT) participate in the very institutions that have labeled GLBT unequal? As family formations in the U.S. have become more flexible in recent decades, the rhetoric about what constitutes the ideal family has tightened—especially from conservative religious leaders. In fact, few institutions have been less egalitarian in this regard than Christian ones, often labeling GLBT not only aberrant, but morally flawed, “sinful.” Furthermore, few institutions are more firmly entrenched than churches in
perpetuating the traditional family, an equally powerful institution the ideology of which places GLBT outside the range of “normal” and, in many ways, outside full participation in American citizenship. Part of the answer may lie in examining places like King Avenue United Methodist Church.

This congregation is struggling through national issues on its own local terms. It is attempting to make sense of the exclusion of gays and lesbians from Christian “Golden Rule” love, and the weak alternative of “love the sinner, hate the sin” tolerance in the United Methodist Church—and institutionally in most of the Christian church overall. At the same time, the church is striving to make sense of the exclusion from the American ideals of Freedom and Equality those people who form “families of choice.” As articulated by Charles Taylor, it is a “long march” from when an idealization is “taken up and associated with social practices, in part traditional ones, which are often transformed by the contact,” to the point where it penetrates and transforms the social imaginary (2002 110-11). Unlike the investigation of ad campaigns in chapter 3, this chapter examines how branding shapes the social imaginaries of people within the church at the ground level. King Avenue began such a process several years ago when it chose to be a welcoming congregation. Gaonkar, in discussing Taylor’s notion of the social imaginary calls it “a fluid middle ground between embodied practices and explicit doctrines” (11). Like the women’s mosque movement Saba Mahmood describes in Politics of Piety, members of King Avenue are engaged in using traditional practices to transform themselves. In Mahmood’s words, the activities of the women’s mosque movement are oriented toward “the retraining of ethical sensibilities so as to create a new social and
moral order” (193). Like those in the women’s mosque movement, King Avenue members would describe their project not as a political one, but as a moral one; and like the mosque movement they remake themselves from the outside in through bodily practices. As Mahmood points out, however, political implications inevitably arise with any effort to remake those “aspects of human life [including] family, education, worship...and so on [which] have been brought under the regulatory apparatuses of the nation-state” (193). Through their practices of acceptance, members of this congregation are changing at least for themselves the image of what constitutes a family and the moral meaning of “family values.” It is in this project of creating a new social/moral imaginary that I see what I call “affective activism.”

King Avenue United Methodist Church is part of a national grassroots organization called the Reconciling Ministries Network (RMN), which “exists to enable full participation of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities in the life of the United Methodist Church, both in policy and practice” (RMN web site “Mission”). This is, in turn, part of a much larger ecumenical “welcoming church” movement that crosses denominational boundaries which RMN characterizes as “probably the fastest-growing grassroots movement in mainline churches today” (RMN web site “Mission”). The movement’s web site includes a disclaimer noting that it is not officially affiliated with the United Methodist Church, but it redraws lines of connection with the church by declaring that its members are United Methodists, and by depicting loaves of bread and chalices, symbols of the Christian rite of communion, with the caption, “We are a people of the Table.” At the same time, it emphasizes its separate identity through the rainbow
colors in its logo and photos of people in a parade with a rainbow of balloons which evoke for many people the idea of “gay pride.” Along with the photos is the caption, “We are Family – We are Parents – We are a people on the move” (RMN web site, “Mission”). Clearly, these are “a people” with an agenda for change within the church. They have their work cut out for them. According to the United Methodist Church web site, its Book of Resolutions states “the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching;” “self-avowed, practicing homosexuals” may not be ordained as ministers; ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions “shall not be conducted by our ministers and shall not be conducted in our churches;” and “no money may be spent on promoting the acceptance of homosexuality.”

It is because of these policies that King Avenue’s branding and worship practices seem so contradictory with its United Methodist package. In fact, when asked whether King Avenue receives advertising materials from the United Methodist Church, the staff member who handles King Avenue’s advertising replied that he does not use them. He expressed concern that using denominational ads might result in an inaccurate association of King Avenue with other UMC congregations with very different “family values.” Interestingly, in an ad campaign earlier this year a caption included the church’s name as “King Avenue Church” without the “United Methodist” part. It is likely that a problem with spacing that prompted the abbreviation, but it is nonetheless revealing of how King Avenue sees its identity as independent of, if not separate from, the United Methodist denomination.
BRANDING ACCEPTANCE

So I expected to find a congregation full of activists at King Avenue (and certainly there are some), but activism is not what draws people to the church, nor is it central to the congregation’s project of constructing acceptance. Rather, it is the association of its brand-name with acceptance, and its reinforcement during worship services that people find powerful and empowering. Lynn Schofield Clark argues that as a culturally bound institution, religion has always existed within a framework that includes the marketplace and media of any given time. It is not surprising, then, that they remain sites of struggle for power and definition involving religion (Clark x). In fact, quoting Nadia Kaneva, Clark calls branding a technique of “creating emotional associations and identities” (12). Drawing on Benedict Anderson’s idea that an imagined community is united by an agreed-upon definition of what the community is, Clark describes religious lifestyle branding as a way of producing identity (13). The branding of King Avenue as accepting has been successful because people who see themselves as accepted and/or accepting feel that they actually experience acceptance during worship services. Although many at King Avenue are reluctant or even averse to engaging in direct political action, through affective technologies that are part of routine worship practices, including music, physical touch, and visual witnessing of each other, the congregation is actively changing its social and moral imaginary. One way to think about this is through an examination of the bodily experience of being in worship services at King Avenue.

Thomas Csordas, in Body/ Meaning/ Healing, argues for embodiment as an approach to understanding the nature of human experience in culture. He sees potential
for transformation and the creation of meaning in bodily experiences of the sacred (1-2). He draws on Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s idea of preobjective (though not pre-cultural) perception, along with Pierre Bordieu’s ideas about habitus and unselfconscious orchestration of practices, to define “a dialectic between perceptual consciousness and collective practice” (243). In this context he refers to Merleau-Ponty’s idea that attention constitutes objects. In discussing “somatic modes of attention,” he distinguishes between a cognitive notion of attention and one based on bodily sensation, paying attention with one’s body. He specifically defines visual attention as a “turning toward” rather than a “disembodied, beam-like ‘gaze’” (244). I hold that in the context of particular church activities, socially informed bodies experience some configurations of people as constituting acceptable families.

There is a visual component to the imagination. The ideal family image is ingrained in the social imaginary. As mentioned in chapter 2, Marianne Hirsch sees the imaginary power of familial ideology as particularly strong in its visual form as circulated in family photographs. In fact, following Hirsch, Mary Bouquet calls attention to an example of contemporary art that takes advantage of family photo conventions so that we see a family emerge from just a few geometric shapes in a painting by Bart van der Leck. In other words, these conventions and the expectations they shape in us actually constitute a family on van der Leck’s canvas (93).

Similarly, there are conventions for family appearances in churches. In the American imagination, and particularly in churches, the “ideal family” includes children, or the possibility of future children, which is part of why GLBT couples have typically been construed as “not family.” At King Avenue, this conventional image has been
altered to include gay and lesbian couples and their children, well as singles with children. Seeing them held up as families week after week expands and reinforces the images of family in the imaginary family photo album. Of course, at the same time these images expand the idea of who can people a family, they also tend to reinforce traditional notions that a family includes children. This was not a point that any of my childless informants brought up as troubling. To the contrary, baptisms and the visible participation of children in services were universally mentioned as affirming the vitality and appeal of the church.

At King Avenue, gay and lesbian couples prominently participate in church services. The addition of children to any family, gay or straight, couples or singles, through birth or adoption, is celebrated publicly. When asked what “family” means at King Avenue, one person replied:

I think “family” at King Avenue simply means “acceptance.” Our families are so diverse, be it by ethnicity, be it economic status, be it… heterosexual couples, gay couples, lesbian couples, the way in which their children have been, for some, obtained, y’know via surrogate mother, adoption—domestic, international…[We’re] not gonna’ push it aside that [a child] was born to a drug-addicted mother…or that [someone’s children] were born to a surrogate mother. I mean they really…love their kids and we love their kids for the diversity in the fact that the resilience of the parents to have children when so many people said, “No, you’re not worthy to be a parent.” …Here I think family is—it’s cherished and it’s accepted in any package that it happens to walk through the door. Yesterday [for example, a woman] brought her daughter to the church for the first time. Her daughter’s a ten-year-old African American, and she’s a 40-year-old white woman, and—I don’t know that that might have been their first Sunday together. And yet she introduced her as “This is my daughter.” And so, it is that self-identification, and just a security to know I think that no one’s going to say, “Well y’know, she’s not really your daughter.” You know what I mean? “Maybe you should call her something else.” Y’know what I mean? It’s just not there, and family, as is true in society, does come in all different shapes and sizes. I don’t look negatively on another church, but I think depending on the location of a
church, y’know it’s very—it’s very heteronormative and Caucasian. And not much for a real diverse population of families.

This not only constitutes these particular groups as families, but blurs the line dividing heterosexual couples from GLBT couples and even non-couples as “potential parents.” In a church setting, this public recognition has potential for taking on more than a social meaning.

Sitting in the King Avenue sanctuary, it is impossible to forget one is in a traditional church building. Built in 1922 and designed to maintain the look of the previous 1904 structure that burned down, the stone exterior of King Avenue exudes stability and tradition. Inside, the 500-plus weekly congregants sit in traditional pews divided into three sections, forming two aisles. Many-paned stained-glass windows nearly cover the two walls most prominently visible from the pews. Overhead the high ceiling is dominated by a central dome that culminates in a stained-glass window from which an ornate light is suspended. Located centrally in front is a raised area that includes the robed choir (approximately 40 members), the pulpit, and the gleaming pipes of the newly installed pipe organ, part of a nearly complete $1.8 million chancel and organ renovation. Suspended above the pulpit is the wooden Jerusalem cross that, along with the bell tower, is featured in ads as a symbol of the church. Joe⁶, a single man in his forties who has been coming to King Avenue for less than a year, describes it this way:

And that’s what I like is the sermons aren’t the traditional, and yet I’m sitting there in that beautiful stone church with stained glass windows and hearing the traditional hymns and having the choir and the grand piano—and that’s all very traditional. Y’know the choir’s up there every Sunday and but then yet the sermons are very relevant and contemporary and the message and the acceptance and all that is very contemporary a very

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⁶ Note that pseudonyms have been substituted for interviewees’ names and that specifics have been changed to protect their identities.
contemporary um message for a church...I mean it’s that juxtaposition of sitting there in this very traditional stone, stained-glass setting and then... even doing like communion very traditionally and then looking around and seeing a gay couple in front of you with their adopted twin boys.

From a very conservative Christian upbringing, it is only in recent years that Joe has come to recognize that he is gay, and he is still trying to come to terms with it in some ways. It is even more recently that he has begun to come out in certain situations. In fact, it was an hour into our interview before he mentioned any of this to me. In a setting like the sanctuary in King Avenue, acknowledgement and approval can be felt as moral and even divine acceptance. All of this is made more powerful, I hypothesize, through the openness with which worshippers likely approach Sunday morning services.

**Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors**

Many of my informants talked about acceptance being felt as “tangible.” Through rituals that draw on the 2000-year-old Christian tradition and the God who lives in the language and hymns of the church, the congregation enacts an embodied acceptance. Affect is a powerful conduit for meaning-making at King Avenue. As an ethnographer, sitting in worship services at King Avenue, I consciously aimed to open myself to the affective experience offered there. As Csordas puts it, “[i]nsofar as my own somatic mode of attention was circumscribed by the motives of ethnography, I did not hesitate to use my own experience as an occasion for data collection” (251). Susan Harding attributes her profound response to an informant’s evangelizing to the fact that her ethnographic interest created an openness to it. She quotes Faye Ginsburg as naming this practice as “self-alteration as a mode of knowing” (289). Similarly, she cites Barbara

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Myerhoff: “You study what is happening to others by understanding what is going on in you, and you yourself become the data-gathering instrument” (289). It occurs to me that in my attempt to open myself to the experience, I am not so different from others beside me in the pews—an idea that is explicit in the refrain of King Avenue’s own song, “Open Doors,” with which they begin every service:

Open hearts, open minds, open doors,
We welcome all who seek to love the Lord.
Bring your joys, bring your burdens, all you rich and poor.
Open hearts, open minds, open hearts, open doors.

By Chris McManus, Director of Music, King Avenue United Methodist Church
As printed in King Avenue United Methodist Church bulletins weekly

This song’s message encapsulates a dearly-held value at King Avenue, closely tied to the congregation’s decision to name itself a reconciling church. The song and the ideas it conveys are also prominent in King Avenue’s weekly bulletins, and in the video, *The Doors Are Open*, which includes highlights of the story of this decision process and how inclusiveness is felt in the church. To the extent members strive to exhibit and practice openness to members and visitors of difference during worship services, it seems likely they would strive for openness to their surroundings and the events and messages around them as well—what Csordas refers to as “somatic modes of attention.” It stands to reason that people come to church for many reasons, but for willing participants, at least part of what draws them to a worship service is their hope that they will receive *something*—that they will be changed, moved, gain a sense of being part of something greater than themselves. Logically, this receptivity to experiencing something seems likely to expand the potential impact of worship services. Whether consciously

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cultivated or not, the context of worship services conditions one to an affective register, to bodily ways of knowing.

A good way to enter an examination of affective response at King Avenue is through four hymns which several of my informants report as touchstone songs, which presumably are for many others in the congregation, as they are sung with frequent regularity—King Avenue ritornellos\textsuperscript{7} as Guattari might say, the refrains in which they listen for themselves (158-171). The powerful impact of these songs comes from various qualities, including repetition, the ways in which their messages are communicated bodily or accompanied by bodily action; their use of pronouns that seem geared to enter the dialogic imagination; and in their impersonal language which, by the very nature of its impersonalness, can be felt as infinitely personal. In the voicing of these songs, I assert, members of King Avenue locate acceptance within their own bodies.

Mentioned by nearly all the congregants with whom I spoke, including even the six-year-old daughter of a young suburban couple, “Open Doors” is strongly associated with the church’s identity and functions like a congregational anthem for King Avenue. Just as in the case of a national anthem, some people described having an emotional response to singing this song each week even if they did not find the music or words particularly appealing. As the song begins, typically several people step forward from the congregation and stand just in front of the first pew to help lead the singing. Other

\textsuperscript{7} According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, a ritornello is “a short recurrent instrumental passage in a vocal composition.” In Guattari’s use of the word, he refers to anything to which one is repeatedly exposed that comes to evoke a particular affective response through its familiarity. As examples, he mentions the voice of one’s father, or similarly, a church icon of a saint. It could be a smell, a smile, or any number of repeated actions, occurrences, or sensory experiences.
than the music director, who is often among those leading, the others appear to come forward impulsively, lending a feel of spontaneity to the whole performance even though it happens weekly. American Sign Language gestures accompany their singing and usually there is at least a handful of people in the pews doing the hand motions as well. The potential significance of the song is expanded when held alongside the fact that “Open hearts, Open minds, Open doors,” is the theme of the United Methodist Church national advertising campaign, and in fact is considered emblematic of the United Methodist mission statement. Julie, a 39-year-old stay-at-home mom who has been a member of King Avenue since 1999, expresses well the pride congregants take in this song:

I like that Chris was able to compose a prelude song that encompassed the Methodist church’s new theme but really states the mission of our church—our particular church. ‘Cause that is all him […] That’s totally King Avenue—someone else could borrow it, but it happened here. And it does speak to what the mission is supposed to be—it’s not the same mission in every single church. That’s the unfortunate thing with the United Methodist Church in general. […] I think he did a nice job of making that song inclusive and really speaking to what our church is about.

In this song, I see the congregation performing a local, original, embodied polemic that speaks to the larger United Methodist Church about how church ought to be done and how “open hearts, open minds, open doors” should be practiced. For members it conveys a sense of family values with which they can identify, the idea that all members of the “family” are welcome without regard to differences. “Open Doors” is the story King Avenue tells itself about being accepting—expressed as an ideal it is always striving to come closer to attaining.
Integral to the congregation’s understanding of itself as accepting is the existence of those who feel accepted. It is not difficult to find attendees who will testify to that experience. One of my informants, Rob, has developed a strong connection with King Avenue in the two or three years he has been attending. As a freshman at Ohio State, his parents’ house in a small Ohio town no longer felt like home; yet neither did his dorm room. King Avenue quickly filled that void. He defines home as “people loving each other” and says, “There is the family you’re born with, and the one you choose—King Avenue is that chosen family for me.” Rob talks about “the spirit of King Avenue,” and for him it was intricately tied to music from the beginning. Only three weeks after his first visit, he starred in the lead role of the church musical and everyone referred to him as Jesus for quite a while afterward.

Rob and several of my informants regularly feel particularly moved at church during the monthly communion ritual. At King Avenue, congregants are released by pew to go to one of several stations where two people (ministers or lay members) offer sacramental bread and wine (grape juice). The organist/pianist accompanies the congregation in singing a communion-themed hymn. Meanwhile, congregants choose a bite-sized piece of bread from the basket offered by the first person at their station, dip it into the chalice of juice offered by the second person, then put it into their mouths and return to the pew. As the last congregants return to their seats, the lights are dimmed, and everyone holds hands with the person next to him or her and sings “The Lord’s Prayer” (see Appendix). Ryan, a 38-year-old with a wife and two young children, described his response to this song in detail:
I’ll tell you the one that always gets me and I always have to kind of hold back a tear is at the—when we do communion at the end and everybody’s holding hands and you know it it’s it’s dark and they sing the Lord’s Prayer at the end and you know everybody’s singing and it sounds like everybody’s in tune including myself [laughs] and then the lights come up and all that and I think that’s really cool. Um I kinda’ you know get a little thing here in my chest. That’s really cool. Everybody’s holding hands and we’re all singin’ the same thing...

The swell of feeling Rob and Ryan and others describe experiencing during this joining of voices and hands fits with what Gregory Seigworth calls “force fields of energies or intensities” (87). Seigworth specifically names music as providing “the most everyday understanding that many people have of affect,” encounters which provoke “moments of unspeakable, unlocatable sensation” (85). Seigworth says “affect involves an exchange between bodies” (87). He discusses an example of a young woman moved to sing to a baby in response to the baby’s touch, in response to affect’s call for the “immediate intermingling of bodies” (87). It is at the embodied level that we experience what Csordas, following Merleau-Ponty, refers to as intersubjective being, the perception of another person as another “myself” (255). We might imagine the congregation’s singing as a similar response.

In addition, for Christians the communion ritual represents taking in the “body of Christ,” a symbolic touch from God of sorts. In reply, this congregation sings to God the familiar prayer. Joining hands and singing brings another level of physicality to the congregation’s response—the resonance of the voice in the chest and throat, the feel of hands inside hands, the expansion of the chest that comes with a sense of interconnectedness of everyone through their hands as well as through the intermixing of their voices raised in unison. As the song ends, the lights are gradually brought back up
to their original brightness, reinforcing a crescendo effect. In addition to an understanding of the word, *communion*, as the sacramental “act of receiving the Eucharistic elements,” *communion* is also defined as “intimate communication,” “fellowship,” “fellowship with God.” One might imagine that all of these meanings are felt as enacted in this paradoxically public moment of intimacy with God and each other.

Similarly, Rob and others are deeply moved when the congregation sings “You Are Mine” when someone is baptized. Joyce, a married mother of two young children who has attended King Avenue for a few years found it especially meaningful. I met with the 40-year-old professional in her office, and, although she was otherwise very composed, business-like actually, she began to cry when talking about baptisms at King Avenue. Like several other people I interviewed, Joyce was reared in a very conservative Christian tradition. She contrasted the purpose of the King Avenue baptism with that of her baptism by full immersion in a Church of Christ summer camp as a twelve-year-old:

Well, when I experienced a baptism of an infant at King Avenue, I was like, this isn’t about salvation here, this is about agreeing as a congregation and recognizing that this child is a child of God [with her voice breaking, and her eyes tearing up] and we’re all gonna’, y’know, bring the kid up together [speaking through sobs] I was like, oh my gosh, all the time I wanna’ cry. It is so [crying still] y’know, moving. [crying continues for another minute or two]

For Joyce, the baptism ritual is emblematic of King Avenue’s supportive and accepting atmosphere.

Baptisms of babies at King Avenue begin with having a young child help pour water from a clear pitcher into the baptismal font. The baby’s family and the congregation make promises to nurture the baby’s spiritual growth within the family and
the church family. The minister then asks the parents what name has been given the baby and then repeats the name and touches the baby’s head with his or her fingertips that have been dipped into the baptismal water. In the final act in this ceremony the minister carries the baby around throughout the sanctuary for all to behold up close. The song, though, comes before all this—setting the tone for what follows. The complete song is in the Appendix; following are the opening words and refrain:

I will come to you in the silence, I will lift you from all your fear.
You will hear my voice, I claim you as my choice, be still and know I am here.

Refrain:
Do not be afraid, I am with you. I have called you each by name.
Come and follow me, I will bring you home; I love you and you are mine.

Words: David Haas (Ps. 46:10; Isa. 43:1; John 14:27)
Music David Haas
© GIA Publications, Inc.

Rob experiences this song as God speaking to the congregation and the congregation speaking to the baby being baptized. The hymn is sung by, but also addresses, the people. The voice comes through the throats of those in the congregation, but the voice is God’s. The words themselves are based on passages in the Bible, which, for those who recognize it, may reinforce that the words are God’s and perhaps the idea that these words have been echoing for years through throats of those in the Church as an historical body of people—a sense of connection through time with others who have given voice to these words. Following Brian Rotman’s notion of Jahweh dwelling in the Torah, this song enacts God dwelling in the bodies of the congregants.
The use of pronouns contributes to the sense of an immanent, personal God speaking directly to each singer. In singing “I am with you” the singer is both the “I” and the “you.” Additionally, the ambiguity inherent in the fact that “you” serves as both second-person singular and second-person plural pronouns means you can hear it as addressed to you personally—both singularly and collectively. “I have called you each by name” reinforces the personal feel of the address. “I love you and you are mine” conveys intimacy and deep emotion.

This song is equally powerful for William and his partner. In their 30s, they have been in a committed, monogamous relationship for over a decade, and recently adopted a child. William sings in the choir and finds the music at King Avenue very moving, most particularly this song that is sung when children are baptized. As he contrasts the message of this song with messages he received at church while growing up, it becomes clearer why this is so meaningful:

Y’know just our church’s anthem, “Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors” is very dear to us. But that anthem “You Are Mine” when the choir sings that “Be not afraid for I am with you” y’know it is—it’s refreshing to hear because it’s certainly not a message I heard growing up in my church. My church background said, “Homosexuality is a sin and as such you will burn in Hell.” And I heard that loud and clear week after week after week, y’know.

In a sense, members of King Avenue can be seen as rebranding traditional Christian rituals, reading acceptance in the baptism rite, for example.

In a similar way, the pronouns and images in “Here I Am, Lord” are evocative. In Denise Riley’s words, “[t]here is a forcible affect of language which courses like blood through its speakers. Language is impersonal: its working through and across us is indifferent to us, yet in the same blow it constitutes the fiber of the personal” (1).
Although the forceful language she describes in “Malediction” is “violent speech” (the “worst words”), I contend the words of this song also have strong “emotional materiality” through which “the word is indeed made flesh and dwells amongst us” as Riley puts it (9). Following are one verse and the refrain of “Here I Am, Lord” (complete lyrics are in the Appendix):

I, the Lord of snow and rain, I have borne my people’s pain.
I have wept for love of them. They turn away.
I will break their hearts of stone, give them hearts for love alone.
I will speak my word to them. Whom shall I send?

Refrain:
Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord? I have heard you calling in the night.
I will go, Lord, if you lead me. I will hold your people in my heart.

Words: Dan Schutte, 1981
Music: Dan Schutte, 1981; adapt by Carlton R. Young, 1988

Singing as the “I” who has borne people’s pain and wept for love of them as they turn away, how can any congregant not be moved at least a little, feel the hurt of it? Rob shyly related that this song always brings tears to his eyes in spite of his embarrassment about it. Surely any congregant can identify with the heartbreak of this song’s rejected lover. His pain is built into the words the singer utters. This is not just any lover, however, but “the Lord of snow and rain.” What kind of person would reject him? the singer might ask himself. And yet singing from within the same body as this one who is willing to bear our pain—the one who has suffered for us—is “I,” the beloved, the one who has stone-heartedly “turned away.” The singer could easily feel accused by the words of the song, and as Riley points out, there is a closeness between accusation and interpellation (13).
Singing a hymn is in many ways quite different from the situation in which Susan Harding finds herself in *The Book of Jerry Falwell*. On the other hand, the result seems quite similar. She describes being on the receiving end of a preacher’s intense witnessing language that ultimately results in her hearing a new inner voice. She describes feeling she “had been inhabited by the fundamental Baptist tongue [she] was investigating...[converting her]...mind into a contested terrain, a divided self” (33-4).

Similarly, within “Here I Am, Lord”—and within the body of the singer—is the heart-broken, heart-softening voice empowered to create “hearts for love alone” as well as the voice of the one whose heart needs to be softened. *Whom shall I send?* asks the first one. *Here I am* answers the second—*as near as your heart*. As Susan Harding puts it, the “Holy Spirit, the very Word of God, has come...to indwell the heart of the believer” (34).

Another way the singer is pulled into the songs is through their generality onto which any specificity can easily be read. In “You Are Mine,” for example, the first verse promises “I will lift you from all your fear.” Everyone feels fear or anxiety about something much of the time, and so it is easy to personalize the idea of being afraid as well as being comforted. Other themes in the song—hopelessness, despair, shame, pain—are similarly vague and universal enough to be easily individualized. Like with a well-written horoscope, terms that are broad enough make it easy for a person to project onto them whatever is happening in his or her own life at the moment and then perceive it as coming from outside—an uncanny fit for his or her exact situation.
FULL AND EQUAL PARTICIPATION

All this is not a successful project without its reluctant participants, however. The banner, for example, is something some people have questioned. The two ministers, who had served at King Avenue for a little over a year at this writing, have heard from some of them:

Pastor 1: When I first came here there were two or three people who pulled me aside and told me they didn’t like the banner...and I would just say “Oh well, it predates me, and I’m not gonna’ do anything in my first six months here that’s gonna’ rock the boat.” But when I visit shut-ins they will ask me about it and then I’ll say, “Well you know, we ask our visitors what brought them to this church and I would say at least one visitor a Sunday will say, ‘I came because of the banner.’” And then the shut-ins will say, “Oh, well, that’s good.” And so it’s clear—to me it’s clear—that they’re not crazy about it, but they’ll say, “Well, if it does that—okay.”

Rita: Do you think it’s the message or the fact that it’s defacing the church or do they say what worries them about it?

Pastor 1: Well, the people who pulled me aside when I first came here, it was the message—how could we speak for God with such certainty? That this is—“inclusiveness as God intends.” And I thought, well, but if we’re not convinced of that, what are we doing? I mean we have to be convinced of that. At least there should be a list of certain things. And other people said well, it’s false advertising. We are NOT inclusive of all people. We—you know—don’t have many African Americans here, we don’t have many Hispanics, we don’t have many poor. So, we were misrepresenting ourselves.

Pastor 2: The people I’ve talked to—I’ve gotten the feeling that they are very very proud of this building...and just didn’t like that big white vinyl banner on the side of their church. So maybe different people have different feelings about it.

Indeed, an older congregant with whom I spoke, George, had this to say:
All of us that were members there before [the previous pastor] come and just knocked down the barriers were not all 100% feelings within ourselves that “Hey, this thing couldn’t been moderated a little bit,” y’know? We kinda’, “Let’s go a little soft here.” We’re just kinda’ makin’ things ripple where we don’t need to make that kinda’ ripple. This puttin’ signs on the church an’ so forth.

It is a testimony, in part, to the commitment to church relationships—especially for long-time members—that George stayed in spite of his reservations as the church undertook the questions of becoming a reconciling congregation. He later remarked:

But the longer I’ve been exposed to [same-sex relationships], the more bland it comes and unnecessary to even discuss it as an item of problem...And when people like Grayson...can stand down there on the corner with those people that...call themselves gays and lesbians...and say, “We’re all the same. You’re all welcome”...Why should I question it?

Apparently George’s respect for his minister and his connection to the church helped him maintain his attendance at King Avenue long enough to change some (though certainly not all) of his ideas about GLBT members. For instance, he went on to say:

These people come—they’re born—they’re raised as kids. I’ve heard them get up there and witness: “My family threw me out. My friends don’t want me around.” And it’s sad. And I’ve had some of those guys come to me. Well, there’s nothin’ sissy about ‘em. I mean big, husky healthy man—just doesn’t care about bein’ around girls. He just, [apparently thinks] “There’s nothin’ wrong with girls. I just don’t have any interest in ‘em.” He’s not tryin’ to kid me; he’s just bein’ honest, that’s all.

At the same time George was slowly acclimating to changes in the church, long-time members, Joan and Hal Wilson, were leading the move toward making a declaration of inclusivity. In their seventies, Joan has attended King Avenue since birth, and Hal since their marriage over forty years ago. Hal was on the Homosexual Study Committee that took up the task of meeting twice monthly for seven months in 1998 to develop and
present “a policy recommendation for the church regarding our official position on homosexuality” (“Report of the Homosexual Study Committee” 3).

The committee applied the uniquely Methodist theological method known as Wesley’s quadrilateral, named for John Wesley, the leader of the eighteenth-century Methodist movement on whose ideas it is based. Specifically, they examined the question of homosexuality through the lenses of scripture, tradition, experience, and reason. The committee did not reach a consensus on whether sex between loving committed same-sex partners is a sin, although they encouraged continued study and respectful dialogue within the congregation. What they did unanimously agree on—and really about as far as they could go within denominational constraints—is that the church was to “be in ministry for and with all. We welcome and affirm persons of every race, gender, age, sexual orientation, nationality, ethnicity, family status, economic status, physical, mental or emotional ability into full and equal participation, membership and lay leadership in our community of faith” (“Report of the Homosexual Study Committee” 23, emphasis in original).

The Wilsons continue to favor a United Methodist Church policy that treats GLBT the same as everyone else, whether clergy or laity, and they are willing to take a visible stand as they did in this case, but they do not consider themselves political—certainly not partisan. Most people with whom I spoke expressed similar feelings. The exceptions were gay and lesbian parents who have had to negotiate through complicated legal mazes such as trying to establish, however tenuous, some assurance of custody for the non-adoptive/biological parent in case the other parent dies. Even then, only one
person indicated commitment to frequent participation in activities like lobby days with Equality Ohio and Stonewall. One of the pastors explained:

We do have a politically active segment. I think we also have a segment in the church that they really see this as a sanctuary and a safe place. And they’ve probably been through enough conflict and enough stress maybe with their families maybe at work and so on, that they’re going to be safe here and not take on more burden.

It is not only GLBTs who seek a haven at King Avenue. Gay or straight, my interviewees who grew up in conservative Christian traditions expressed enormous relief at finding King Avenue. They want the feel of a traditional church, but the radical acceptance better fits the personal moral framework of their adulthood, and for parents it is also the morality to which they want their children exposed. As a result of the migration from conservative churches, a broad range of theologies circulates within the church, but it is the consistent message of non-judgment and welcome people emphasize.

Regardless of whether members of King Avenue choose to engage in political activism outside the church, their commitment to the affective activism within the church has promise for influence beyond King Avenue’s walls. For one thing, their children are growing up with little or no distinction among various household arrangements as families. Secondly, by its very existence as a United Methodist Church, King Avenue (and other reconciling congregations) stretches the definition of what the United Methodist Church stands for in terms of GLBT issues. Finally, by nurturing in each other a notion of morality around the stand they have taken by being members, congregants strengthen their own sense of religious and moral authority in talking about the full range of household arrangements they have come to see as families.
Maintaining the images of nontraditional arrangements as families, of GLBT members as accepted, and King Avenue as accepting requires ongoing repetition of the performances of accepting and being accepted. At the same time, many other congregations in the United Methodist Church continue to reinforce the idea of “love the sinner, hate the sin.” However compartmentalized, it will be hard to maintain these contradictory moves within one body indefinitely. The future holds an inevitable tipping point when the church will either split into separate entities or officially acknowledge a change in its own moral imagination. As pictures of nontraditional families continue to be added to congregations’ mental family albums, anything less than full acceptance of gays and lesbians—at least those who hold themselves out as parents or potential parents—will become increasingly incompatible with the church’s self understanding. To the extent that mainline denominational churches make this leap, there is potential for a shift in the larger cultural imaginary about the morality of homosexuality and the definitions of “family” and “values” in the “family values” debates. New voices of moral and religious authority will likely emerge to advocate that “families of choice” are as valid as traditional families. Given the history of church involvement in social movements, social policy may be transformed as well.

While an emphasis on children may continue to privilege certain kinds of families, legitimizing the idea of “families of choice” inevitably opens the definition of family to include the spectrum of household arrangements people put together. While this may weaken the power of the Myth of Traditional Family, ultimately uncoupling benefits of citizenship from a particular family form has potential to strengthen real life families through more egalitarian and productive public policies.
APPENDIX A

KING AVENUE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH HYMNS
“The Lord’s Prayer”

Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed by thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

Arrangement by Alfred Hay Malotte
As printed in the King Avenue United Methodist Church bulletin, May 6, 2007

“You Are Mine”

I will come to you in the silence, I will lift you from all your fear.
You will hear my voice, I claim you as my choice, be still and know I am here.

Refrain:
Do not be afraid, I am with you. I have called you each by name.
Come and follow me, I will bring you home; I love you and you are mine.

I am hope for all who are hopeless, I am eyes for all who long to see.
In the shadows of the night, I will be your light, come and rest in me.

Refrain

I am strength for all the despairing, healing for the ones who dwell in shame.
All the blind will see, the lame will all run free, and all will know my name.

Refrain

I am the Word that leads all to freedom, I am the peace the world cannot give.
I will call your name, embracing all your pain, stand up, now walk and live!

Refrain

Words: David Haas (Ps. 46:10; Isa. 43:1; John 14:27)
Music: David Haas
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"Here I Am, Lord"

I, the Lord of sea and sky, I have heard my people cry.
All who dwell in dark and sin my hand will save.
I who made the stars of night, I will make their darkness bright.
Who will bear my light to them? Whom shall I send?

Refrain:
Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord? I have heard you calling in the night.
I will go, Lord, if you lead me. I will hold your people in my heart.

I, the Lord of snow and rain, I have borne my people’s pain.
I have wept for love of them. They turn away.
I will break their hearts of stone, give them hearts for love alone.
I will speak my word to them. Whom shall I send?

Refrain

I, the Lord of wind and flame, I will tend the poor and lame,
I will set a feast for them. My hand will save.
Finest bread I will provide till their hearts be satisfied.
I will give my life to them. Whom shall I send?

Refrain

Words: Dan Schutte, 1981
Music: Dan Schutte, 1981; adapt by Carlton R. Young, 1988
“Open Doors”

Refrain:
Open hearts, open minds, open doors,
We welcome all who seek to love the Lord.
Bring your joys, bring your burdens, all you rich and poor.
Open hearts, open minds, open hearts, open doors.

We gather here to praise and worship;
In our diversity we find a common ground.
We speak a language of one God, one love;
Seek the Lord, sing God’s praise with joyful sound.

Refrain

By Chris McManus, Director of Music, King Avenue United Methodist Church
As printed in King Avenue United Methodist Church bulletins weekly

The Genesis of "Open Doors" - how the song evolved in the words of Chris McManus.
Open Doors was conceived in a short few hours in October 2001, as I was searching for an appropriate song to conclude the upcoming Christmas Pageant, based on the traditional Mexican story of Las Posadas. As you may know, Las Posadas recounts the story of Mary and Joseph as they traveled the city of Bethlehem in search of a place to rest. Every door was closed to them, until one kindly innkeeper opened his doors to a crude stable. In the reenactment, when the door is finally opened to them, a great celebration is held.

It was a Saturday morning in October as the finishing touches were being put on the script for our pageant. I was sitting in a meeting at Broad Street UMC, during which the new Methodist slogan, "Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors," was mentioned several times. It hit me how well that phrase fit in with the "open doors" of Las Posadas. I spent the rest of the meeting quietly sketching out lyrics; after the meeting, I went directly back to King Avenue to compose a melody. I recall that it was only a couple of hours later that the words and the tune were wedded together. I had the closing song for our play.

I had little idea at the time that the song would become a fixture in our services, and eventually in other United Methodist congregations across West Ohio. Thanks to the overwhelming response of our congregation and the evangelism efforts of people like Evy Kummerle, that has happened, to my great delight and satisfaction. I hope the song continues to express how we feel about King Avenue and our sincere efforts to welcome all who seek to love the Lord.

From: http://www.kingave.org/music.html
Directions for Singing

Learn these tunes before you learn any others; afterwards learn as many as you please.

Sing them exactly as they are printed here, without altering or mending them at all; and if you have learned to sing them otherwise, unlearn it as soon as you can.

Sing all. See that you join with the congregation as frequently as you can. Let not a slight degree of weakness or weariness hinder you. If it is a cross to you, take it up, and you will find it a blessing.

Sing lustily and with a good courage. Beware of singing as if you were half dead, or half asleep; but lift up your voice with strength. Be no more afraid of your voice now, nor more ashamed of its being heard, than when you sung the songs of Satan.

Sing modestly. Do not bawl, so as to be heard above or distinct from the rest of the congregation, that you may not destroy the harmony; but strive to unite your voices together, so as to make one create melodious sound.

Sing in time. What ever time is sung be sure to keep with it. Do not run before nor stay behind it; but attend close to the leading voices, and move therewith as exactly as you can; and take care not to sing too slow. This drawling way naturally steals on all who are lazy; and it is high time to drive it out from us, and sing all our tunes just as quick as we did at first.

Above all sing spiritually. Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing him more than yourself, or any other creature. In order to do this attend strictly to the sense of what you sing, and see that your heart is not carried away with the sound, but offered to God continually; so shall your singing be such as the Lord will approve here, and reward you when he cometh in the clouds of heaven.

From John Wesley’s Select Hymns, 1761; printed in The United Methodist Hymnal, vii
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