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The City Imagined: Race, Place and Identity in the Making of Urban Church

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

THE CITY IMAGINED:
RACE, PLACE AND IDENTITY
IN THE MAKING OF URBAN CHURCH

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
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PROGRAM IN SOCIOLOGY

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JESSICA M. BARRON
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Introduction

Urban Church is a three year old congregation on a quest to fulfill their mission statement of becoming a “...challenging, relevant and never boring”¹ church for Chicago’s young, twenty-something urbanite. Mostly single, this somewhat racially and ethnically diverse group of young adult urbanites enjoys high energy worship services flooded with high-tech media and unorthodox sermons. Urban Church is an evangelical congregation that meets in a performing arts theater in downtown Chicago. They are a smaller congregation of approximately 150 members, comprised of predominantly young adults in their twenties and early thirties. Urban Church co-opts the elements of young adult culture as a model for expanding the church and meeting the needs of its congregation—those who are delaying marriage and children, pursuing advanced degrees, and those receiving more exposure to various cultures, races, ideologies, and religions (Marti 2005; Flory and Miller 2008). In Urban Church’s quest to fulfill their pastoral charge, members, leaders, and volunteers are confronted with the question of what a relevant church for the city of Chicago looks like. Each group of actors takes part in the development and production of this congregation as they attempt to capture a seemingly illusive market (Marti 2005; Flory and Miller 2008). As these various producers come together, their imagined ideas of the city of Chicago are brought

¹ Portion of the Urban Church mission statement

to the forefront. How these imaginations are fostered, incorporated, rebelled against or dismissed brings to light the politics of imagining the imagined city. This paper seeks to explore these varied, dueling, and sometimes contradictory imaginations informing the construction, operation, and branding campaigns of Urban Church. Particular focus will be paid to the racialization of urban space and White middle class consumption that has informed the evangelical tradition as a whole and Urban Church specifically.

However, Urban Church not only strives to be a relevant church for the young urbanite. In their marketing schemes and claims made in sermons and in creative meetings, Urban Church asserts they are the true church for the city of Chicago— in essence; they are the authentic urban based church *in* the city of Chicago, *for* the city of Chicago. The claim as an authentically urban church is essential for Urban Church in order to associate themselves with those they regard as authentic members of Chicago's urban community. These authentic members are imagined to be young racially diverse, urban dwellers. They also pursue authenticity to set themselves apart from neighboring competitor churches vying for the same demographic and target location in downtown Chicago. Affirmation of authenticity comes through the usage of a central urban location (Marti 2005; 2010), incorporation of a middle class consumer lifestyle centered on the city (Zukin 1993,1996; Greenberg 2008), and the visible presence of what various urban based churches consider as the urban staple—Black men and women (Wilson 1997; Wacquant and Wilson1999; Marti 2005; Edwards 2008).

However, while Urban Church is geared towards the young urbanite living in a racially diverse, metropolitan city, the majority of the creative leadership team of Urban

Church is currently white suburbanites living in homogeneous neighborhoods in nearby Indiana. Their distance from the city and their target market creates a regional and racial disconnect between the leadership staff and its racially diverse members. This disconnect leads the leadership staff to rely on stereotypical tropes of authenticity found in the racialization of urban space (Johnson 2003; Grazian 2004). Simultaneously, the city-based congregants incorporate their own imagined narrative of the city that often times contradicts but also supports the suburban-based leadership team's understanding of the city of Chicago. As the city of Chicago is imagined by actors within Urban Church, who express differing levels of place-based identities, interpretations and expectations of what a church in and for the city come to a head. Through the examination of these varied imaginations, I will explore how this young, urban-based congregation pursues their pastoral charge of relevancy by establishing themselves as an authentic urban church.

I am using the term "imagined city" for two reasons. The first being that in the overwhelming majority of my interviews and throughout my ethnographic work, I found congregants and leaders using this term to make the conceptual distinction between the way in which the suburban-based leadership team and city-based congregants imagined 'their city'. My goal in this paper is not to prove which imagination is correct or which opinion is more valid. Instead, I want to discuss how these varied and often times dueling imaginations reflect and rely on racialized classed and placed understanding of the city of Chicago and of urban place in general. In Anderson's (1991) famous work *Imagined Communities*, he explains the idea of nations as a fraternity of "limited imaginings" made up of "horizontal comradeship" and culturally significant systems tied to the imagined.

Conceptually, this framing of imagined communities describes, to a certain extent, the dynamic of the imagined city for Urban Church. As they seek to develop the identity of a church *in* the city of Chicago, *for* the city of Chicago, congregants and leaders wrestle not only with their conception of the city but also with each other's imagination.

Furthermore, these congregants and leaders rely on each other logistically to sustain the church and creatively to grow the church into their ideal congregation.

Second I use the term, "imagined city" to guide the discussion of authenticity. I am conceptualizing authenticity as a cultured understanding of what is real, informed by a collective imagination. Authenticity itself is never objective but simply a shared set of beliefs about the nature of things we value in the world, reinforced by conscious efforts of cultural producers and consumers alike. Grazian (2004) states authenticity shares two related aspects, one of which will be used throughout this analysis, "...it can refer to the ability of a place or event to conform to an idealized representation of reality; that is to set expectations regarding how such a thing ought to look, sound and feel" (Grazian 2004:10). Authenticity is alluring to outsiders due to its status as something that is commonly hidden from mainstream public, in a sense, a privileged mystic. However, the search for authenticity is always a failing prospect as authenticity is always manufactured (Grazian 2004; Peterson 1997). The search for authenticity is also presumes a static existence rather than a complex and contradictory one. Thus, in the quest for authenticity, we rely on stereotypes as a consequence for the search for what is truly authentic (Johnson 2003; Grazian 2004). Peterson (1997) claims authenticity is not inherent in an

object or event that is designated to be authentic but is a socially agreed-upon construct.

Thus authenticity is ironically always fabricated.

Similarly, Grazian (2004) suggests there is a sliding scale of authenticity and thus almost anything can be regarded as more or less authentic in relation to its competitors. The sliding scale allows tailoring of collective memory and fabrication of authenticity to serve the needs of the present. As a result the business of authenticity can be a lucrative market (Grazian 2004; Peterson 1997). Capturing authenticity through fabrication to meet cultured expectation is a common occurrence by cultural producers in cultural industries such as film, television, music, or art (Peterson 1997). Authenticity can also be a place-based concept. Place is equally valuable for cultural production. Discussions of authenticity are often dependent upon a shared understanding of a particular place or location (Grazian 2004; Lloyd 2006; Peterson 1997). Urban Church uses the expectations of urban space to set the expectations of what their church should look, sound and feel. However, neither leader nor member is positioned to claim authentic Chicago because it does not exist.

Throughout this paper I will examine how Urban Church's pastoral charge to be a relevant church in the city of Chicago is manifested through these varied and dueling imaginations based on stereotypical tropes of authenticity. Specifically I will focus on the imagined idea of urban space, the social construction of place and the embedded role of race plays in this process. All of these factors are present in organizing Urban Church, an evangelical congregation.

The evangelical tradition has a distinct presence in American Christianity as highly participative, experiential church (Flory and Miller 2008; Chavez 2004). Many evangelical churches are known for their compatibility with contemporary consumerism, innovative practices, and decentralized authority. However the vast majority of these evangelical churches remain steadfast in their conservative values couched in a White middle-class framework. Stuck in the middle of tradition and innovation is where Urban Church finds itself. Urban Church is an emerging congregation, creating a niche market, branding itself to a segment of the population that has currently outgrown its place in the evangelical tradition (Flory and Miller 2008; Emerson 2006). They are caught between utilizing traditional frameworks of evangelical church organization while exploring a relevant model for a young adult population. Young adults are the lifeline for religious traditions; they are the next generation of leaders who can assist in keeping religious traditions sustained and viable (Flory and Miller 2008). Thus it is important to pay attention to how the next generation of leaders orders their belief systems to correspond to their social, economical, and cultural situation. As Urban Church seeks to fill in the gaps of evangelical congregations it is also met with the task of creating its own congregational culture.

Evangelicals on the Move

Much of the durability of American religion comes from its deep roots in the foundation of this country (Emerson 2000, 2006; Chaves 2004). Yet one of the reasons various religious traditions have become more publically visible than others is their ability to adapt to emerging cultural trends and social shifts (Flory and Miller 2008;

Chaves 2004). Housing one fourth of the religious population in America (Emerson 2006) evangelicals utilize the cultural engine models (Greenberg 2008) of marketing, branding and strategic planning to seek change while retaining, to some extent, their religious mission. Evangelicalism in America emerged in the early 1800's with a focus on local congregations rather than large national congregations. Today, evangelicalism has maintained its individual authority allowing the freedom of innovation in their practices. However, evangelical congregations are without an organizational tradition to fall back on. They are easily innovative but also have the habit of losing themselves in their innovation.

Over time American evangelicals have made prominent changes in the way they organize and distribute evangelical church culture (Flory and Miller 2008; Chaves 2004; Edwards 2008; Becker 1999). These changes occur with a focus on socio-demographics of their congregations, the White middle class consumer (Emerson 2006; Edwards 2008; Becker 1999; Flory and Miller 2008). Many evangelical churches are based on innovative concepts, adapting to larger cultural themes within White middle class America. Flory and Miller (2008) provide a typology of the congregations that emerged: *Appropriators, Innovators, Resisters, and Reclaimers*. The focus of this analysis will be the space in between the innovator and appropriator congregations in the evangelical tradition. These typological categories are useful in examining the development to Urban Church as an evangelical congregation managing innovation, independent of a centralized authority.

Appropriator congregations mirror what is secularly available, adapting popular forms of entertainment and cultural vernacular to compete with the secular marketplace

for the devotion of their members. At their core, appropriator congregations are based on of White, middle class consumer values of independence, family, stability, and suburban living (Flory and Miller 2008; Chaves 2004). Many of these churches are also known as *mega-churches* which are large in structure and in population. These churches are often referred to as Wal-Mart churches for their ability to create a one-stop-shop for its members (Flory and Miller 2008).

However, the youth of these churches grew up and quickly became disenchanted with all of the bells and whistles these mega churches offered. A backlash of the individualistic spiritual quest commonly found in the appropriator congregations, young adults began to participate in what Flory and Miller (2008) call, “a recovery of the ritual”. Young adults began to turn to smaller churches and religious establishments as they produced a distrust and cynicism of large scale institutions (Flory and Miller 2008; Marti 2005). Young adults wanted to experience community and participative worship rather than be entertained. Simultaneously, the rise of globalization and the digital revolution gave young adults unrestricted access to varying world views, causing them to seek out a revitalization of the truth. Becker (1999) documents that as congregants experience discomfort they must negotiate between the organizational structure and the violation of their own expectations which ultimately can lead to a loss in membership. Marti (2005) states this is when innovation happens. When congregations have the ability to strategically interact with their social and religious environments they are able to capture shifts, pursuing inclusive models for those who are seeking something new.

As a result, *Innovators* began to emerge. Their goal was to ‘strip down’ the church of hierarchy and practice to create an organic, communal environment led by teams and not pastors to help grow their spiritual faith and impact their community (Flory and Miller 2008; Emerson 2006). But the downfall of innovative churches is just this tactic. The lack of authority and overall structure coupled with the need for reinvention gives these congregations a short lifespan (Flory and Miller 2008). Consequently innovative congregations are highly consumable as the next best thing in popular Christian culture, placing them at higher risk to be adapted and mass produced (Griswold 2004; Marti 2005).

Not wanting to conform to White middle class consumption but not quite wanting to form another organic religious movement is the dilemma Urban Church faces. Caught between the intersection of innovators and appropriators, Urban Church seeks to utilize its urban location and youthful leadership to advertise itself to a young adult population. The leadership believes Chicago’s young adult is experiencing a transitional period in both their life cycle and amongst the on-going transitional periods within evangelical congregations. They are seeking to create an authentically urban church based on an urban imaginary. Yet in their efforts, Urban Church is confronted with the racial tensions that have plagued the evangelical tradition (Becker 1999; Marti 2005; Edwards 2008; Emerson and Smith 2000). Furthermore, the presence of urban place in this narrative also calls for an analysis of the role the city has played in the dilemma of race for religious institutions and public culture in general. And in a city like Chicago, where race is

pervasive in the layout and organization of the city, Urban Church's varied imaginations offer differing roads to navigate these tensions of race and urban place.

Race and Place

Race is a socially constructed concept found deeply embedded in the social world and arguably overlooked for its influence in American life (Jacobson 1999; Taylor 1999; Omi and Winant 1997; Angier 2000; Feagin 2009). In a racialized social system, every facet of the social world is used to reinforce a racially based system privileging Whites above all other groups (Bonilla-Silva 2006). As a result, the construction of race creates physical, economic, social, sexual, and biological boundaries that generate a racialized reality cloaked under the auspice of the natural, "...race resides not in nature but in politics and culture" (Jacobson 1999:9). Thus Blacks and non-Blacks work, live and socialize virtually separated from each other (Edwards 2008; Bonilla-Silva 2006; Feagin 2009; Charles 2006; Yancey 2003). Due to these structural boundaries, meaningful interracial relationships are extremely rare. Consequently, most people are more likely to learn about churches through social networks which are unlikely to be interracial. Considering churches are voluntary organizations, people choose along the lines of sameness producing segregated religious experiences and organizations (Edwards 2008; Emerson 2000).

Furthermore, due to our society being governed by a racialized social system, Whiteness is central to the organization of society. Whiteness is the cornerstone of the racial system in the U.S. (Edwards 2008; Feagin 2009). The function of White racial identity and its centrality to the system, places Whites in culturally and structurally

dominant positions (Edwards 2008; Bonilla-Silva 2006; Royster 2003; Feagin 2009; Hoelscher 2003). The pervasiveness of Whiteness plays a fundamental role in the way various institutions in society function, including evangelical congregations (Edwards 2008; Flory and Miller 2008; Emerson 2000).

Both White and interracial congregations in the evangelical tradition are more representative of the preferences and desires of Whites than the racial minorities within these congregations (Edwards 2008; Emerson 2006). The reinforcement of Whiteness comes through the privileging of their religio-cultural practices and preferences—“the style of preaching, music, activities, missionary interests, theological emphases, structure of service, dress code, political and community activities” (Edwards 2008:8). Even in interracial evangelical churches in the United States, 68% of the pastors are White, thus the leadership possess and invests in White religious culture (Edwards 2008). While some of evangelical churches are racially diverse at all levels; the diversity does not seem to affect the core culture and practices of the religious organizations, presenting a congregational life more commonly seen in all White evangelical churches than others (Edwards 2008; Marti 2005). Thus Whites have limited knowledge of varied worship styles in minority communities. As a result, minority members of White or interracial evangelical churches must negotiate various aspects of Whiteness as they try to adapt to normative White worship culture (Edwards 2008). Moreover, if these non-White members seek leadership positions within this White tradition, their access is contingent upon their proficiency in White evangelical attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, and credentials—ultimately in their possession of White evangelical cultural capital (Edwards

2008; Emerson 2006). Many of these non-White members become tokens of integration, made to stand out in their non-Whiteness to represent their congregations' dedication to racial diversity (Edwards 2008; Marti 2005; Emerson 2006). Urban Church is a moderately racially diverse church however, their congregational practices fall into a pattern of privileged Whiteness. However, it is not only race that is at play in this analysis. The location of Urban Church provides a key component to their identity and development and is crucial in understanding the story of Urban Church.

Place can be described as a unique geographic location in material form that is invested in meaning and value (Gieryn 2000). Moreover, place making and meaning ascription influence how individuals relate and interact with each other in a given location. Place has the ability to facilitate economic exchange (Greenberg 2008) or become a site for social control to reinforce hierarchy (Davis 1998), boundaries, and power (Gieryn 2000; Zukin 1993). Place is not something that can be escaped in the social world as its overt social construction and modification is constantly utilized to fill a purpose in society.

Specifically, the study of public places such as the city is central to the analysis of Urban Church. Various scholars have discussed the role of the city in American society and its transformative power socially, culturally, and economically (Zukin 1993,1996; Greenberg 2008; Lloyd 2006;). Lloyd (2006) simply states that the city is characterized as patterns of production for economics, culture and technology. The city is a public place that has been used by the market economy to create and manufacture places to consume. Thus it can be argued that cities are fabricated and created for material and

social consumption (Zukin 1993; Grazian 2004, 2007; Lloyd 2006). Thus the city is a place that is simultaneously real and imaged, organizing and organized by both practical activity and cultural representation (Lloyd 2006). Public cultures develop out of our interaction with public places such as the city (Zukin 1996). Public spaces are an important means of framing a vision of social life in the city, a vision both for those who live there and interact in urban public spaces (Zukin 1996). As cultural consumers, we are drawn to this production of symbols and space, consuming and reproducing public culture. Throughout this paper I will examine how Urban Church navigates and incorporates these cultural cues in their own imagination as they attempt to develop a relevant and authentic church in the city. This navigation process is necessary for Urban Church in order to understand how to consume the city and in turn how to produce a cultural object to be consumed by the city. Urban Church acknowledges an expectation of life in a city, real or imagined, and attempts to adapt to that concept accordingly.

Racialized Urban Places

Places, both public and private are also to be examined as extensions of a racialized reality that physically and symbolically create barriers resulting in “landscapes of privilege” (Duncan and Duncan 2003), power and difference (Zukin 1993; Gieryn 2000; Squires and O’Connor 2001). These barriers are found throughout the city of Chicago where Urban Church has chosen to reside. Landscapes such as Chicago hold a unique power to sustain the systemic racial hierarchy that orders our society (Duncan & Duncan 2003; Hoelscher 2003; Denton & Massey 2003; Wacquant & Wilson 1997; Mele 2000; Zukin 1993; Wilson 1987). Through the racialization of public and private place,

the built environment becomes a landscape riddled with racially coded symbolic meaning. Racially coded themes become translated into universal truths, naturalized over time reflecting the power of the racial structure that organizes American society (Hoelscher 2003; Kefalas 2004; Vera and Gordon 2003, Chito-Childs 2009; Feagin 2009). In particular, extensive media coverage and political discourse centered on the urban poor overwhelmingly become studies of predominantly Black communities, with little regard to the structural barriers that created this phenomenon (Venkatesh 2000; Wacquant & Wilson 1997; Denton & Massey 2003; Wilson 1987; Anderson 2000). These patterns show a distinct and almost inescapable relationship between urban place and Black Americans. The repeated representation of Blacks in urban locations racializes urban spaces, specifically impoverished areas, producing a racially coded, public understanding of these urban locations.

Consequently, the term urban is not only a place but also becomes racially coded to refer to Black America, Black individuals, and the highly debatable Black culture (Johnson 2003; Feagin 2009; Jackson 2001). Particularly, in cities like Chicago, with a long history of urbanization and deindustrialization, these racialized codes become much more prevalent (Wacquant & Wilson 1997; Kefalas 2004; Massey & Denton 2003; Russell-Brown 2008). Therefore urban is not only a place but then becomes a racialized representation of a larger structural condition. As Urban Church takes on an urban location, they are met by the racialized public culture that surrounds the city of Chicago. Urban Church becomes confronted with the tenuous relationship between their Black members and urban location. The expectations of what a church in the city and for the

city should look like reveal the racial and urban imaginary that is held by leaders and members. However their imaginations are often conflicting resulting in racially charged strategic planning and marketing schemes that are informed by the racialization of their urban location.

Race and Urban Religion

Only in recent decades have evangelical churches tried to pursue racially integrated congregations (Edwards 2008; Emerson 2006; Marti 2005; Becker 1999). Some congregations provide a theological mandate and others use our highly globalized society as a call to become more “globally minded” or to become “global people” (Ammerman 1997; Edwards 2008; Emerson 2006). In this effort, the use of urban place became a central feature to facilitate this goal. Those congregations that are located in larger metropolitan areas such as Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, and Houston are particularly known for attracting racially diverse members due to the overall racial demographics of these larger urban cities (Becker 1999; Ammerman 1997). Literature emerged in the past few decades examining the racial dynamics of these congregations; specifically how race is acknowledged, operationalized, marketed, and promoted (Emerson 2006, Marti 2005, 2008, 2009; Edwards 2008; Becker 1999).

Throughout this analysis, I am making a distinction within the term *urban based* churches as some consider themselves downtown churches and others inner-city. This is a distinction of place, class, and the target consumer. Downtown churches are often located in the cultural and economic epicenter of a city. Literature also suggests a number of downtown congregations are in a niche market for young adult, urban professionals

who are seeking a church that is focused on their current position in the life cycle (Marti 2005, 2010; Flory and Miller 2008). These congregations continue in the tradition of seeking out the latest cultural trends that appeal to a young adult demographic. One of these trends is experimenting with the usage of urban locations such as night clubs, art galleries or lofts in the downtown area of a city (Marti 2005, 2010). Conversely, inner-city churches are usually located in low income communities serving the residents there.

Grazian (2007) argues, amongst other things, that urban place fosters a space for a particular stage in the life cycle, namely prolonged adolescence. When describing consumers of the downtown night-life scene, he writes, “These late-adolescent and twenty-something students represent a growing cohort of young Americans who have postponed the traditional accomplishments of adulthood” (Grazian 2007:226). Using the postindustrial economy and the rise in educational attainment, cultural producers have capitalized on the cultural marketing schemes and consumption practices of this newly formed, but growing demographic². With the help of cultural entrepreneurs such as creative marketers and cultural laborers, urban nightlife settings create a place Garzian (2007) describes as the ‘nocturnal experience’ (2007:24). In turn, urban based, downtown congregations co-opt this marketing strategy by creating a nocturnal experience for their prospective consumers (Marti 2005). These concepts of nocturnal experiences coupled with a racialized urban location allow us to interpret how Urban Church as a particular congregation in a particular place, creates their congregation. As they navigate through innovation they are confronted with the public culture of the city and the urban imaginary influencing the development and operation of their congregation.

² 2007 American Community Survey, Census Bureau.

Methods

I conducted ethnographic observations at Urban Church for seven months uninterrupted. This project is a continuation of a previous project that began eleven months prior to this study. I was introduced to the site by a friend who had been attending the church for a couple of months prior to my invitation in November 2008. I entered the church and immediately spotted the large bar in the center of the lobby where members were receiving non-alcoholic drinks before and after the service. The church was dimly lit and popular secular music was playing in the lobby as well as contemporary Christian music. Mostly young, twenty-somethings attend the services and virtually no children were present. During the study I conducted a series of ethnographic interviews while in the field (Weiss 1994; Emerson et al. 1995). I also conducted semi-structured interviews with twenty members of the congregation.

The interviews conducted were not randomly selected but were convenience samples (Weiss 1994). I began interviews with a group of core informants and asked them for recommendations of interviewees. I also handed out flyers before and after the worship service at the information tables and around the lobby outlining my study and my need for interviews. Those who wanted to interview e-mailed me their information and interviews were set up. My interview criteria were men and women, eighteen years of age and over who have attended the church consistently for at least three months. These interviews were recorded on a digital recorder. I conducted the interviews in offices, coffee shops, restaurants, and in some cases, the home of the participant. I asked questions concerning their background with religious institutions, their perspective on

Urban Church's location, advertisements, and marketing materials, their experience as a member and/or leader in the church, and I also asked them to describe Urban Church, its congregants, and their understanding of the church's target market. Lastly, Urban Church is a church plant of a larger suburban church in Indiana. I asked interviewees about the "Big Church" as they call it, their affiliation with the Big Church, and their understanding of the relationship between the two churches. I transcribed and coded the interviews based on these questions.

I interviewed ten women and ten men who ranged in ages from 22-40 years and ranged in racial and ethnic background. Participants also ranged in involvement. Sixty percent of those I interviewed were in some leadership or volunteer position. I engaged in participant observation of the evening services and other church related events such as dinners, leadership meetings, and community building events. I took field notes during all services and church related activities. I took field notes on pads of paper during the services. However, during other church related activities I jotted notes on napkins and on my cell phone. After each service or activity I went home and typed out the notes, coding them based on reoccurring themes.

These various forms of qualitative methods were employed to achieve triangulation at various levels in the analysis (Brown-Saracino et al. 2008, Lofland et al. 2006). When the church began a morning service half way through my research, I attended both services as a comparative tool (Lofland 2006). Pseudonyms are used for all participants and for places within Chicago and Indiana to ensure anonymity for those involved in the research process. The name of the church has also been changed.

I came in the project with a grounded theory approach. However, through countless observations and conversations I began to explore how the church marketed itself to a young adult demographic reportedly missing from evangelical congregations. I explored how producers and consumers collectively create the experience of a church in its early developmental stages. Along with gaining in-depth understanding of the church operations and practices (Greswell 1994), I sought to engage the literature on place to understand race and racialized urban places as a tool for authenticization (Grazian 2004). The intersection of race and place will be used to examine how Urban Church legitimates their presence in the city as an authentic urban establishment that is relevant to a young urban population.

Lastly I chose to study one evangelical congregation as my unit of analysis as religious congregations are the core organizational form of religion in the U.S. (Emerson 2006; Chaves 2004). Although a case study does not allow for generalizable findings, it is invaluable for understanding the intricate details of group culture, identity formation and how individuals and organizations construct their social worlds in a given context (Edwards 2008; Lofland 2006). The core activities of congregations are to gather people to engage in the cultural activity of expressing and transmitting religious meanings (Chaves 2004; Edwards 2008). Urban Church is a promising site for generating propositions about the race, place, and urban congregations. Additionally this case will demonstrate features of a more general phenomenon of the reestablishment of young adults in religious congregations.

A City Imagined: Welcome to Urban Church

I mean it is kinda interesting...you know? You walk in and it's like bam! All of these pretty people in all different [skin] colors wearing all these cute hip clothes, designer bags, designer shoes, designer jeans. I sometimes think the pastors are really trying to make this place seem like young and urban because they are from Indiana. It's like suburban kids playing dress up in the city. Sometimes it's just over the top.

— Crystal, Black Female

In 2007 Urban Church opened its doors. Pastor Phil, his wife Emily and their two young sons are a White, upper middle-class family from one of Indiana's wealthiest suburbs. Phil and Emily began Urban Church when they were just twenty-six years old. Pastor Phil is the son of one of the Midwest's most well-known pastors whose mega-church averages eleven thousand members on any given Sunday. The father's church is known as the Big Church by the members of Urban Church. With the financial backing and an inherited leadership team from his father's church Pastor Phil set up a "campus" of his father's church in Chicago.

The leadership team along with Pastor Phil set out with the mission to target unchurched young adults and provide them with a spiritual atmosphere that is relevant to their lifestyle. This notion of what is relevant emerges from the vantage point of church leaders who are White, upper middle-class and originally from an upper middle-class, White suburb in Indiana. They articulate a view of Chicago's public culture that promotes the notion that residents are young, racially diverse, middle-class consumers. To the pastor and his creative team, residents of the city of Chicago are well acquainted with pop-culture, enjoy and engage in high tech media, are creative, artistic, educated, fast-paced, and cool (Lloyd 2006):

After the Sunday evening service let out, I was standing out in the lobby area off to the side, away from the heavy traffic. Pastor Phil came up to me and asked me how I liked the service. He is tall, about six feet four inches, has a warm round face and strategically- messy blonde hair. He was wearing a fitted black, button down shirt with an embellished print across the entire shirt. He had designer jeans on and black, leather shoes with a square toe. After some small talk about the service, Pastor Phil proceeded to point out various people to me who were engaged in conversations around the lobby. He pointed out a fair-skinned Black woman with a large red afro and said, “I just love her look, she is so artistic and that’s what we like here.” He then pointed out two other women who appeared to be Latina and told me how they were either in school or young professionals. He described them as “real go-getters”. He made the point to tell me that they had a lot of people who were in college or up and coming professionals, “You know ‘cause that is what Chicago is, on-the-go young people.” He then pointed out a couple more people to me, both men and women, and gave me a blurb about their appearance, style, where they went to school in the city, their credentials, and professional life. He smiled and his chest was a bit puffed out, almost with a sense of pride as he ran down the line of all of the different types of people he had in his congregation. None of the people he pointed out had children or were married. He ended by saying, “And you, I love the fact that you have a nose ring and you are going to be a doctor. You have a very unique look and that is something we embrace here. I mean that’s what the city of Chicago is all about.”

— Fieldnote

All of the people he pointed out were young, lived in the city, dressed well according to him, educated or employed, and single without children. There are minimal families imagined in the city, and of these families, most of them are young urban families still maintaining a hip urban identity. Throughout countless sermons, video promotions, announcements, and conversations with the pastor, the city is imagined as a place where young, hip urban dwellers lead a distinctively urban-creative life, had the ability to constantly eat out, and taking part in the “downtown scene”. The pastor and his creative team direct much of their energy towards manufacturing a church that is relevant according to their understanding of Chicago culture.

I approached a tall ten story brick building in downtown Chicago. I combed through the directory then found it: Urban Church Office. I dialed the number and was buzzed in. I entered into a large loft that had been converted into three offices and a lounge. Inside there were brand new Mac desktop computers, various iPhones, iPods, and other technological devices plugged into the walls and displayed on the desks. I was invited to sit in on a meeting by the pastor and members of the creative team. The pastor along with two white female members of the creative team and three male musicians, one Black, one Filipino, and one white from the weekly service entered. The two minority musicians were recent add-ons to the team and were both members of bands that performed all over the Chicago-land area. Everyone in the room was under the age of thirty. After some small talk and introductions, the group of young adults sat in expectation waiting to hear the pastor's plans for the new component to their evening service. The pastor began the meeting by stating, "I am a relevant communicator...and I want a creative place to be current." He then went on to express his concerns for wanting to add in more urban styles of art (hip-hop dance, rap, hip-hop music, painting, poetry, spoken word) to their evening service. He was looking to the musicians for assistance. However, all of the suggestions they made were shot down by the pastor. He responded by bringing up different adaptations of hip-hop and art that other suburban-based mega churches had done. Members of the creative team also wanted to incorporate more "community building activities" for members after the service such as going to various restaurants in Wicker Park and on Michigan Ave. They distinguished desired restaurants as those that had cool vibes, good music, and received some type of recognition by reputable culinary critiques. The meeting ended an hour and a half later with no resolutions made.

— Fieldnote

Although Pastor Phil enlisted the help of authentic urban-dwellers, he became the authority in what this "creative place to be current" would look like, based on his perspective of the city and those who reside in it. He also relied on the other conventions produced by mega-churches that did not share a similar location or demographic.

Furthermore, the residents of the city are not understood as highly religious. The descriptions of those who are "unchruched" by the pastor and his creative team, incorporates those who have stepped away from church but are on their way back, don't have time for church or who don't have a place to attend that meets the needs of their

“*city life*”. The cultural producers of Urban Church use these images to drive their marketing as they seek to create an identity that serves and attracts these unchurched residents of the city of Chicago:

After the music set ends, of the Sunday evening worship service, the theater gets dark and a video begins to play on the flat screen that is mounted above the stage. There is not talking in this video, only solemn music plays. It is a montage of still photos of young adult faces. There is one face per frame and each shows a different expression. Some are crying others have their head in their hands, some look confused, or worried. The video ends and the lights come up. Pastor Phil is standing in the middle of the stage. Pastor Phil explains this video as reiterating why they have chosen Chicago as the home for Urban Church. “You know Chicago is one of the top three youngest cities in the country...it’s also the most unchurched city in the country. There are more liquor stores in this city than there are churches. Our goal here at Urban Church is to provide those people with a place to go and feel comfortable...a place unlike any other church in the city.”

— Pastor Phil Sunday evening service

This statement, although statistically inaccurate³, reflects a greater, common conceptual understanding of urban cities by outside religious organizations that have been reproduced since the early 1900’s (Orsi 1999; Ammerman 1997). The interpretations of the urban world by those who come from an outsider perspective understand population density and heterogeneity to encourage a freedom from social and spiritual restraint (Orsi 1999). Urban moral sensationalism provokes outsiders to enter into urban landscapes to reform and spiritually revive their inhabitants. Urban Church is only partially different in their approach to the city. Urban Church’s charge is not solely reformatory but desires to be seen as authentic—“the church for the city, unlike any other church here”. They also incorporate a focus on young adults as a result of location. With their motto “One

³ According to the 2007 American Community Survey distributed by the U.S. Census Bureau, Chicago is ranked as the 15th youngest city in North America.

relationship at a time”, they focus on relating to Chicago’s residents in order to evangelize to Chicago’s young unchurched, urbanite.

However, the creative leadership staff and pastor do not consider themselves to be outsiders of the city of Chicago, completely. Pastor Phil moved to Thousand Oaks, an affluent Chicago neighborhood, a year and a half after he started Urban Church. However he still owns a home in Indiana where he and his family stay multiple days out of the week given that he is still a full time pastor at his father’s church. Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of the creative leadership staff that first began with the church, currently lives in Indiana and is currently employed by the Big Church. However, they whole-heartedly consider Indiana a “suburb of Chicago”. In a dozen sermons that referenced the Big Church, Pastor Phil has even referred to the suburb of Indiana where his father’s church is located, as the “greater Chicago-land area”. In actuality, the Big Church is located a little over ten miles away from a south suburb of Chicago. Thus, it is not a suburb of Chicago but on the cusp of a suburb on the south side of Chicago. It technically falls just outside of the greater Chicago-land area.

This distinction annoys some members who are Chicago residents. I sat down in the church lobby with Lisa, one of the newly appointed leaders at Urban Church. She is not from the Big Church and resides in a nearby Chicago neighborhood. She is a part of five other new Chicago-based leaders that have been recently appointed. Their positions are all voluntary.

We sat down at one of the high two-seater tables placed all throughout the lobby. It was a week day and so no one from the church was around. She requested we meet at the church since it was close to her gym and she had a workout planned shortly after. She is in her late twenties, has

her M.A. and is a successful business woman. There were security guards and staff from the theater getting the lobby ready for one of the weekly productions going on later that night. I asked her about the relationship between Urban Church and the Big Church and she began to discuss the “suburb of Chicago comment” right away, “No are you kidding...I would never consider them [the Big Church] in the greater Chicago-land area or a suburb of Chicago. Anything that is 45 miles away is far away...that just doesn’t make sense. I am from Chicago, not the suburbs and I don’t consider anyone that lives where they are from to live in Chicago...and see that’s the problem, they think they [leadership staff] are from here and they aren’t.”

— Fieldnote

Lisa makes a clear distinction of who has the right to claim a local identity. For Lisa, a Chicago resident, the boundaries of identity are geographically tied to the city limits. Her statement shows the conflict in identity politics based on a conception of geographic boundaries. Valerie, the only non-Indiana based elder on the board at Urban Church, shared similar sentiments. I met Valerie in the church offices for an interview. It was early on a Saturday morning. Valerie is a forty-two year old Black woman who grew up in Chicago and is now a lawyer involved in the political scene in the city. These statements about the geographic relationship between Chicago and the Big Church came up to which she responded, “ People from Chicago are kinda of like...Indiana is...uh...[laughter]...let’s just say by no means have we ever considered any part of Indiana to be a part of us...”

This dissention calls into question who exactly holds the power to identify and furthermore, how does this differentiation affect the church’s identity. As stated previously, the pastor recently moved to Thousand Oaks, but that did not buy him a pass into residency. Members still view him as a suburban resident due to his constant and continuous involvement with the Big Church. Often times these symbolic boundaries

hold identity for Chicago residents. Members such as Lisa think of themselves as city dwellers and do not want to be associated with the identity of a suburbanite. This distinction also implies a hierarchy in opinion. Each group asserts their own capacity to define boundaries based on their residential ties. The city-dwellers claim they know what is suburban and what is urban. And the suburban leadership and locally based Pastor claim they have a handle on the city because they imagine the boundaries of the city to incorporate their suburb. Those who live in the city of Chicago view themselves as holding the authority in defining what an authentic church in and for the city of Chicago should look like.

However, their residential differentiation isn't the only thing that separates them. It is clear on Sundays which group is which by the way they arrive. While those who live in the city are dropped off a block away by the bus, walk from the train or go from the free parking lot across the street. The leaders from the Big Church arrive together in a group. Every Sunday, like clockwork, a caravan of cars, complete with drivers, pulls up to the front of the theater to drop off the pastor and his leadership team from the Big Church.

It's 4:45pm and there is a row of five cars lined up in front of the theater. There are two BMW sports cars, two Mercedes Benz luxury sedans, and a large SUV. Each car has a driver. These drivers are interns from the Big Church. The pastor and his family have their own car. The rest of the cars have a mixture of different people on the leadership team. There are 12 people that arrive, 5 women and 7 men. All are well dressed in popular trends. The men are wearing designer jeans, shoes and tops. The logos and brand names are in visible areas on their clothing. All of the women wear heels that are a minimum four inches. Some of the heels are boots and others are pumps. All of the women hold oversized designer purses. All of the women wear skinny jeans or leggings. Three of the women wear heavy eye make-up, known as the smoky eye. All of the women wear large

costume jewelry such as bracelets, necklaces, and rings. However, three of the women have large diamond rings on their ring fingers. The group of 12 comes through the double doors in a rush. Some are on their phones, others are spouting off orders to the volunteers who are waiting for them at the door. The women are loud, laughing and talking. Three of the men greeted some of the volunteers with a handshake, asking them how their week was but then quickly moving on to the next person. Three of the women who were in the caravan rush to the back of the theater telling the other women that they had to go to the bathroom to fix their hair and make-up, from their long drive. The volunteers already at the church were not dressed the same way as those in the caravan. The volunteers were all fashionably dressed but it was a little more subtle. The women didn't have heavy eye make-up or large designer bags and only one of the volunteers was wearing heels. One of the volunteers stated, "Whenever they come, I feel like it's European Fashion week up in here." The other volunteer laughed and they progressed to talk about how different their dress was from the leaders. They commented on all of the designer labels, heels and make-up, "I can't wear all that and then try to catch the train...I'd bust my face trying to get on in those heels and then get jacked (laughter)."

— Fieldnote

The distinction in arrival and dress display a different orientation to the city. The city-based volunteers saw the suburban leaders as separate by dress partially due to not having to ride public transportation. There are also symbolic boundaries set by the arrival. The caravan is a clear distinction of group, location, and the public culture each brings to the church. Furthermore, members of the caravan even identify that their ride is long, inadvertently alluding to the possibility that the Big Church falls outside of the bounds of the city.

However, various members have stated that the Pastor and his creative team do not have the ability to create the type of church they desire due to their outsider perspective:

Honestly I don't think people from Indiana understand Chicago...I think people have a stereotype of what Chicago is...its hip fast and its some of that but Chicago is grounded city...we are still in the Midwest ...they

think it is the media and the lights and the way people dress and its some of that...but I always laugh when they walk in because we don't wear that here in the city...I just don't think he [Pastor Phil] knows what it means to be a church in the city.

— Valerie, Black Female

However, after spending time with various members, I found that over a third of the congregation is transplants to Chicago with a large majority of those relocating within the last five years. Sixty percent of the people I interviewed were all transplants from cities and suburbs across the Midwest but none had lived in a metropolitan city like Chicago. However because their ties to the suburbs and those other cities are less frequent, meaning they only visit a couple times a year, these transplants view themselves as official urban-dwellers. Many of them imagined Chicago to have a fast paced lifestyle, opportunity, and a city-life that was not available in some of their home cities such as Lincoln, Detroit, or Des Moines. Although the leaders and members share similar imaginations of the city, much of the conflict arises from the ability to translate that image into an everyday lifestyle. Additionally, the presence these transplanted members in the city reinforces the pastor's notion of Chicago being a place of young, single go-getters. Thus, these assessments by both parties not only conflict but ironically support each other.

Valerie also went on to say that she did not believe the pastor knew his place in the city and that she did not know the church's place in the city. She didn't view Pastor Phil as someone who really understood the city of Chicago even though he recently moved there. She stated Thousand Oaks isn't a fair representation of the diversity of the city and lamented that it limited his scope. For Valerie, this constant going back and

forth does not offer the pastor the ability to understand what life in the city really is and therefore, where Urban Church should orient itself.

Conversely, I had the opportunity to sit down with one of the original members of the leadership team. He is also one of Pastor Phil's closest friends. We met in the church office adjacent to the theater. I walked in and there were some of the volunteers in the office. Paul was walking rapidly throughout the office, spouting off events, greetings and other important details to communicate over the phone. Repeatedly throughout the interview, Paul answered his phone, answered incoming texts, and left the room to give more instructions to the volunteers. During the course of our interview, Paul repeatedly referenced being a church in the city, so I asked him what it meant to be a church in the city. He responded:

Well I can't really tell you what urban is just yet but I can tell you what it's not...it's not the suburbs. People have other things going on than just the church. They don't have little league and Bible study. They have other things going on so they can't be at church every night. We want our church to represent the city of Chicago...so what is the city of Chicago...on one block you got projects on the next block you have million dollar high rises...in the city of Chicago you have low income housing living next to rulers of the world...so we want that scope that have an urban mindset..that are in the urban flow that are cultured and connected...we want to create that community.

— Fieldnote

Paul makes an interesting description of the city by contrasting it to the suburbs. In his mind, these are two different places whose lifestyles will not fit each other. And while the grand economic distinctions and the ambiguity of the urban mindset may communicate a lack of connection with the city of Chicago, he is also expressing his imagined view of the city. He is expressing the city as a place of close proximity of difference and diversity that produces energy and excitement for the church and its developers. Interestingly, in

my last three months in the field, there was a shift in the leadership. More city based leaders were appointed by the pastor, but the creative leadership staff that began, is still heavily involved in the marketing, branding and development of the church.

Marti (2005) states, “a person initially becomes a part of a congregation because he or she sees it as something that fits with some element of himself or herself” (Marti 2005:58). The corporate identity of Urban Church is that of a young urban dweller, who is educated, professional, and either completely new to the faith or has stepped away from traditional Christian churches and is on their way back, looking for something different. For many members that I spoke with, Urban Church was a church to help them understand their place in this world as an urbanite and a Christian, a concept that seemed contradictory. Urban Church was sought out as something new and different that could hopefully address the reality of being a young urban dweller, not following the traditional paths of suburban Christianity—getting married young, having children early, and settling down (Flory and Miller 2008). However, many members soon realized Urban Church may be ill-equipped to address their concerns. Urban Church is still heavily resourced by the Big Church resulting in much of the mega-church model spilling over into the development of Urban Church.

It was brought to my attention that Pastor Phil and Kyle [another leader] are from an event driven church...you know cause of his dad’s church...they come from that suburban mega church model of big productions. But we have all of these things here in the city so we don’t need to get it from the church. We don’t need productions, we have the city...we need the basics...not a big program cause I don’t have time for that...just tell me how to live my life day to day, I don’t need a production.

— Lisa, White Female

Although Lisa and other members express dissatisfaction with some of the programming efforts, they still attend Urban Church, and in Lisa's case, get involved in leadership.

Members may not agree with the conceptualization of what is appropriate for a church in an urban space, but they appreciate the effort of a church attempting to meet their needs.

City Life: Expectations of a Church in the City

In an effort to market itself as relevant and current, Urban Church sets up various marketing campaigns throughout the city of Chicago. Their advertisements are found on buses, trains, in mailers, and flyers all over the downtown area.

At one of the downtown stops on the "L", there is a large advertisement for Urban Church on the back wall so when you stand to face the train you can view it. There aren't any other advertisements attached to it. Urban Church bought out the entire ad space. The picture is of a martini glass, spilling over a little, with the church logo as the olive. The back drop is burgundy and underneath the glass it reads ABSOULTE CHURCH, it a sort of steel grey color—a play on the vodka company Absolute. There is a Scripture reference in the top left hand corner that refers to Jesus quenching your thirst. At the bottom of the advertisement is the name of the church, the meeting place and the time of the Sunday service.

— Fieldnote

Urban church also has advertisements that appeal to the consumerist side of the city.

On two of the busiest bus routes that run through the heart of the Magnificent Mile on Michigan Avenue, Urban Church has bought two advertising spaces. This one has a red backdrop with large brown Coach Purse in the middle. The slogan reads, *DESIGNER CHURCH*. The Coach Signature patterns, which are the Coach initials, are replaced with the initials from Urban Church. At the bottom there is all of the church information and a small Scripture reference in the upper right hand corner.

— Fieldnote

In the book *Branding New York*, Greenberg (2008) documents the cultural engine in New York that began to tap into the strategy of image marketing to appeal to potential visitors, investors, and residents on a cultural level. Cultural consumption was the new market.

Greenberg (2008) introduces the idea of the psychographic technique; selling the experience and image of a place giving it a greater abstraction of value. In the age of consumption, cultural distribution through symbols, perceptions and branding is a key component in the consumption of urban space (Greenberg 2008; Zukin 1996). The images used in the marketing campaign of Urban Church puts forth the notion that nightlife and high end consumption are a valued and common narrative for the city of Chicago and in turn, for those who attend Urban Church.

The location and time of service is suggestive as well. Urban Church rented out a performing arts theater to hold their weekly services:

The church is located one building over from the corner of one of Chicago's busiest downtown streets. On the right hand side of the entrance to the church there is a glass window and a sign that reads "Ticket Counter". On the other side of the glass there are usually two workers, sometimes on the phone, sometimes on the computer or eating. They do not engage with members of the church. On the left side of the main entrance there are another set of double doors. These doors are red and closed. They are guarded by a red velvet rope reminiscent of those found in Hollywood on premier night. Another 10 feet down the left wall there is another set of closed red double doors guarded by a red velvet rope and a 23 year old, 6'3" black male. He wears tailor fit designer shirt, tailored *Seven* jeans [labels on the pockets], and black leather boxed toe shoe. In his hand he holds the weekly handouts given out to all that attend the service. When it is time for the service to begin, everyone begins to file in through the set of double doors that were closed. You can also enter into the other double doors closest to the main entrance that also have a greeter. Once you enter in through the double doors you are met with live music from the worship team. The church service is held in a small sized performing arts theater. It is stadium seating with red and black seats like those at a movie theater. There are three sections of seating all opening up to a main stage. The stage is not elevated however. It is simply a semi circle floor of finished wood and two brick pillars. Each section has 10 rows of seating. There are dim lights in the theater but stage lighting down on the stage and the church logo is displayed with lights as a back drop. There is a large screen above the stage and two portable screens on each side of the stage displaying the church logo. The two outer sections are

roped off and ushers funnel everyone into the middle section. At the top of the middle section there is a large sound booth where two men sit and control the lights and the screens. On either side of the sound booth there are aisle ways separating each section. Above each outer section is a handicapped seating area. Once the middle section is full, the ushers release one row at a time of the roped off section if more seating is needed.

— Fieldnote

The time and use of an urban space afforded Urban Church the ability to manufacture an environment that would appeal to the image of a young, urban dweller—an lifestyle that is imagined to come alive at night. Accordingly, Urban Church planted itself in a performing arts theater in the downtown area of Chicago. There are bars, clubs, and restaurants only blocks away from this location. The church holds their main service every Sunday evening at 5:30pm appealing to this idea of a nocturnal experience:

The performing arts theater is located in the west loop, on the corner of one of downtown Chicago's busiest streets. Once you enter into the doors you are met with dim lighting, low music, and a large bar 30 yards away yet all of the alcohol has been removed from the shelves. If you failed to read the signs outside, welcoming you into a church service, you may have thought you walked into a lounge or happy hour spot. The lobby is filled with groupings of very attractive, well dressed young people of varying racial backgrounds. There was an almost equal amount of males in the lobby as females. One visitor that accompanied me said under his breath, "these people look like they are going for a night out, not going to church".

— Fieldnote

This venue allows the congregation to identify as a legitimate consumer and producer of urban culture in hopes to appeal to a young adult population. The performing arts theater is also functional for the church. The location provides the congregation with high tech facilities to create current media representation that appeal to those young adults living in a technological age. One fourth of the current leadership staff has experience with media,

graphic design, computer technology, or media production. These members of the leadership team have turned many components of the traditional service into technologically savvy forms:

Today is *Night at the Movies*. This is the second time the church has presented this format as opposed to the typical evening service format (singing, tithing talk, prayer, greeting, pastor preaches, ending prayer, singing, dismiss). After a short music set by the worship team, the ushers hand out small white bags displaying the City Church logo, containing freshly popped popcorn from the machine in the lobby. The ushers also hand out soda (Coke products) to everyone. The lights dim and Antowone Fischer comes on the big screen. The movie is edited to fit into a 30 minute time frame with small 3 minute pre-recorded clips of the pastor providing spiritual relevance to the movie we are watching. These clips are woven into the editing of the actual film.

— Fieldnote

Urban Church's emphasis on relevant and contemporary services presents its members and visitors with an alternative experience to traditional Sunday services. *Night at the Movies* is an innovative way the church uses popular film, along with their location in a theater, to present their religious beliefs. Chaves (2004) states that, churches devote most of their resources to and involve most of their members in producing and reproducing religious meaning through ritual and education. Using the ritual of moving-going in popular culture and film as a learning tool, Urban Church hopes that *Night at the Movies* transmits religious knowledge to its viewers. However, most people leave the service talking about the free snacks and the movie rather than the sermon.

The access to lighting and sound machines gives Urban Church the ability to treat their worship set like a rock or pop concert.

The service begins. The band is live and loud just like a concert. The music sounds like a pop-band. The worship team is a group of young, racially diverse singers and musicians. They are set up with a row of

singers. Behind them are an electric guitarist, bassist, drummer, an acoustic guitarist and a pianist. The music section of the worship service lasts for twenty minutes which is almost half of the service. As the pacing and emotion of the song build the lights and sound adjust accordingly; lights get brighter or dimmer, music softer or louder. Everyone in the congregation is standing during the entire worship set. Many are singing along as the words are displayed on all three screens. Some are bobbing their heads to the song, others have their hands up; some are doing a small dance at their seat. One of the female visitors that accompanied the group I came with said, “I know this is church but I just can’t help but shake my ass to this song.”

— Fieldnote

Chaves (2004) reports “more than half of the time in religious events is taken up by sermonizing or with music of some sort.” Urban Church is able to recreate an atmosphere that is not only central to evangelical services but by reformatting it to appear like a concert, it appeals to the entertainment aspect that the city is imagined to be known for. Congregational worship is shaped from below by the social characteristics of participants and from above by the denominations and religious traditions which the congregation is embedded (Emerson 2006; Marti 2005; Edwards 2008; Chaves 2004). There are also shared experiences within the space of a specific location that shapes human interaction (Borer 2006). Urban Church uses the symbolic identity of place to connect its product to its target consumer. The use of technology and aesthetics takes the actual function of a place, commodifies it, adds a symbolic (consumable) meaning and creates a cultural movement that ultimately mobilizes a receiver to act (Greenberg 2008). Urban Church is hoping the location of the church in a performing arts theater will mobilize young city dwellers to attend.

Additionally, Urban Church conceptualizes the young adult demographic as an elusive group to retain. Urban Church often finds itself constantly shifting its practices

around to establish its own cultural identity as an evangelical congregation and as a place for a marginalized market. But sometimes these adaptations place various members of the congregation, specifically urban city dwellers, in awkward positions. Assumptions about their mannerisms, speech, and lifestyle can be inaccurate, impractical or even offensive:

I'm sitting next to two of my informants, Erica and Lacy. They are both Chicago natives and grew up on the Southside. During the service Pastor Phil kept on saying, "it's alright to talk back to me during the service. You can say 'holla at ya boy' or 'preach'...I'm alright with that." As he was giving these examples he added a "Black" dialect to them, recognizing these sayings are popular amongst Black congregations. Oddly enough, most of the people sitting in the audience were not Black. I approached Erica after the service. I saw her visibly shaking her head throughout various parts of the service. When I asked her why she was shaking her head she said, "I mean...I just don't like it when he [Pastor Phil] does that...you know tries to talk Black one week, then act like he knows what's up the next. It's like he is trying so hard 'cause we are in the city. We are in the city, not the hood...You know, just do you...we respect that a lot more than you trying to be like how you think we want you to be. I know everything is still getting worked out so he probably doesn't even know what he says and how it comes off...it's all new so I'm just going to let it go for now."

— Fieldnote

Erica makes a clear distinction between the location of Urban Church as being the city and not the hood. She is building off of a racialized understanding of city landscapes in which poor and disproportionately Black neighborhoods are described as 'hoods'. The downtown location of the church does not encompass this area according to Erica and the pastor is not a Black man from the hood. Therefore, she views these statements as out of line. However, she dismisses what the Pastor said because she views him as new to the city thus unfamiliar with the complex racial dynamics that are a part of the landscape. In an effort to be relevant, Pastor Phil draws on a limited, racialized imaginary of the city.

However, one aspect of Urban Church that has remained constant is the intense focus on the way people look in both the congregation and amongst the leadership staff. Their keen interest in appearance includes everything from weight, height, dress, hair, race and gender. The focus on the physical appearance and strategic placement of individuals is arguably one of the most important authenticization tools the creative team uses to present themselves as a relevant church for the city. Particular focus is paid to those who are on the volunteer leadership staff, specifically racial minorities. The next sections will discuss the leadership structure and the overall usage of “beautiful bodies” to sell Urban Church.

City View: Beauty, Race and Leadership

The pastor just started implementing leadership meetings before the service at 5:00pm. It is about 4:50pm and leaders and volunteers are standing on the stage waiting for the meeting to begin. There are about 34 leaders and volunteers present. The group is diverse although all of the team leaders are white. Most of the singers and musicians stand together while most of the greeters sit on the side of the stage. The room is filled with white smiles, thin physiques, long hair, and fashionable clothing. I felt like I was at a club or onset of a TV show featuring fashionable, young Hollywood. One of the women is white with blonde hair. She is wearing a low cut, mini black sequenced dress with knee-high black boots, heavy eye make-up and red lips. Another woman wears a long grandfather sweater with a short floral print dress and riding boots. She looks like something out of a Ralph Lauren Catalog. There are two black men talking on the side of the stage. They are both six feet, three inches. One is a male model. He has dark skin which makes his impeccable bone structure stand out. He wears a tight fitting v-neck shirt that shows off his athletic and toned physique. He completes his outfit with designer jeans and leather sneakers. The other black male is fair, with a booming voice and bright white smile. He has on a tailored collared shirt, designer jeans, and black sneakers. Both of the men stand out amongst the crowd because of their height, color, and loud voices. The men are mostly tall, and athletically built. Most of the women in the room are thin and wearing heels of some sort. The majority of them also has long hair, wear tight fitting clothes, and a lot of make-up. It is about 5:00pm and the pastor's

wife gets on the microphone and asks everyone to sit down. She is almost six feet tall in her heels. She is wearing a tank top with a small blazer and leggings. Her top is shorter and does not go over the leggings. She was wearing black boots that came up over her knee. She has platinum blonde hair, a bright white smile, heavy smoky eye make-up which makes her bright blue eyes stand out and she wears pink lipstick. As she passes out the list of the order of service, one of the vocalist notices that her name is not on the list. She leans over to another vocalist and says, “I wasn’t dressed to sing so I’m off the list.”

— Fieldnote

The overwhelming majority of leaders hand selected are physically attractive people, young, and fashionably dressed. It is clear that if one does not maintain their appearance, their services will not be needed on that Sunday.

At the core of the stylistic element of Urban Church is a matrix of White middle class consumption intersecting with material goods, racial and ethnic minorities, and urban space. These elements make up the strategic placement of aesthetically pleasing individuals in highly visible positions—but not just any pretty face, faces that coincide with the expectation of urban space as conceptualized by the middle class White consumer (Lloyd 2006; Grazian 2004). The faces of Urban Church, those who are in positions of high visibility, all share very similar characteristics. This is not uncommon in churches or other organizations. Club owners often hire attractive people to attend their venues to make their club more appealing to onlookers (Grazian 2007). However, in the case of Urban Church it is who they place in front and how they place them that makes their authenticization process unique. Urban Church uses young adults ranging in ages from 21-31, nice teeth, thin if they are women and athletically built if they are men, wearing the latest pop culture fashion trends, performing middle to upper middle class

consumption (knowledge or possession of latest technology, ability to dine out after service, go to the movies, possess designer labels or shop at popular or well known department stores) and a healthy dose of racial minorities. These actors reflect the urban, racial imaginary that is held by the creative leadership team.

The worship team is a group of young, ethnically diverse singers and musicians. They are all hand selected by the pastor and his creative team. Each musician is told what week they are singing and where they will stand on stage. They are set up with a row of singers. Behind them are an electric guitarist and a bassist on stage left. In the back center of the stage there is a drummer. On stage right behind the singers there is an acoustic guitarist and a pianist. The lead singer is a slender, medium height black male. He is dressed in designer jeans, with a tailored wine colored collared shirt on with a grey vest over top and a mustard and wine tie with a paisley print. There is a light skinned, tall black woman singing as well. She shares many of the solos with the lead singer. She has on wide-leg jeans, red patent-leather pumps, a gray wrap and crystal heart necklace. There is a middle-aged white male singer wearing a tightly fit, tailored brown collared shirt with white pinstripes and a designer logo on the left pocket. He is wearing designer jeans and shoes. There is another singer who is a tall woman with long blonde hair. The pastor's wife has on a tight black mini dress with black leggings and high black patent-leather stiletto boots. There is another male singer. He is in his late teens. He is a light skinned black male with a tan blazer on, a brown collared shirt and medium fit jeans. He is wearing designer shoes on the bottom. The last singer is a short Pilipino woman. She looks to be in her late thirties. She is dressed in a plaid short cape with a renaissance style silk shirt underneath. She has on skinny jeans and 4" mary-jane heels. She has on a thick black headband that compliments her tight bob haircut. One guitar player is a clean cut young white male. He is wearing a navy blue collared shirt with skinny jeans and white loafers. The next drummer is a young white male with long shaggy hair semi-tamed by an oversized beanie. He wears on oversized neon green shirt, large cargo pants, and brown sneakers. The last guitar player sits on a stool. He is significantly shorter than the rest. He is a young darker skinned Asian male wearing a white polo shirt and cargo pants. The drummer is a young white male with light hair, a short but shaggy beard, and bright blue eyes. He is wearing a tight plaid long sleeve collared shirt, skinny black jeans and sneakers. The pianist is a young black female with glasses. She is wearing a gray sweater dress with black stockings and flat black riding boots.

— Fieldnote

Each week the creative leadership team and the leader of the worship team sit down and discuss who will on stage, who will greet and who will sing. Each of those selected are provided with a dress code and a placement on stage or territory in the lobby for that Sunday. Their strategic placement is orchestrated by those in charge of the image of Urban Church to appear current and relevant for their location.

The manufacturing and fabrication of authenticity is also driven by the need to achieve as a church in a competitive market. Convincing the city of Chicago that they are an authentic church is only half the battle. Voluntary organizations are in a market-driven environment where they compete for the time and energy of potential members who can in turn, expand their resources. In my interviews 75% of the city-based leaders suggested that in a business, you have to select your niche market. Who are the people that you want around, who are the people that you want to attract, who are the people that you want to reach? The church has a specific market they are trying to reach and much of their resources are focused on this market. In the imagined understanding of the city, the Pastor and his creative team have conceptualized their ideal congregants as members of the consumer class—those who are in the middle to upper-middle class or can perform this class status. Popular products like the I-Phone, Blackberry, or iPods are consistently utilized and referenced throughout sermons, marketing campaigns, outreach programs, and weekly church events. It is not uncommon to see the majority of the congregation on their Blackberry's or iPhones during the services. Some are using the Bible applications on their phones instead of bringing their Bibles while others take notes on their phones; however, some just text during the service. Pastor Phil usually preaches from his

MacBook laptop and gears many of his messages towards the latest I-Phone application or other social networking programs such as Twitter or Facebook.

In order for the pastor to attract this consumer class, the leadership and volunteers must be well-versed in White middle class consumption patterns. I sat with one of the members after one Sunday after service. James is a short, lighter Black male with a large, inviting smile. He is always fashionably dressed and today is wearing a nice button down shirt and dark-washed, nice fitting jeans. He had been a greeter for about four months, welcoming people, getting them to sign up on contact lists, helping the visitors meet people and so on. But during the last three weeks, he was not out in front greeting. He had been doing more of the set up and tear down which is a position of low visibility. I waited for him after the lobby had cleared out and helped him tear down some of the tables. I asked him why he hadn't been greeting and he said the pastor asked him to step down. He was replaced by a much taller, darker, Black male who was also a model for Calvin Klein. He assumed it was because he made a comment to the pastor about the way the leadership teams looked, claiming it misrepresented who is in the city of Chicago. He went on to say:

I think that ties into the presentation of the church where aside from the leadership only being white, those who are under the leadership or are in main key roles, have to look a certain way as well...definitely stylistically, ethnically that is where they provide their leeway to seem diverse. Definitely stylistically and that is from clothing, weight, and just overall look...like one step down from sex sells...where you know pretty people attract other pretty people and you know pretty people are good for the face of a business....but this is a church and so I think it[the marketing] get's all mixed up.

— Fieldnote

James claims that the leadership uses minorities and attractive people to get people interested in attending. The necessity of physical appearance in the authenticization process communicates an assumption by Urban Church that young adults have a particular aesthetic that they are accustomed to in an urban space (Grazian 2007; Marti 2005). James also notes that being diverse is an expectation for the city so putting ethnic minorities in visible positions allows the church to seem like an authentic urban establishment. James did speculate that he was released from his position because he was significantly shorter than all of the other men in the volunteer position so even though he had the dress down, he didn't have the physical aesthetic.

Eleven of the people I interviewed stated the advertisements and the positioning of various people in leadership and those volunteering are all a part of a grand marketing scheme to draw in certain types of people. The city-based leadership staff is frustrated and confused with these models as they communicate a very narrow, racialized and classed understanding of the city of Chicago. Volunteer leaders and other members of the congregation are concerned that the organizational structure of the church sends out conflicting messages regarding who the church is for and how they are going about attracting this 'target demographic'.

Well...[long pause]...I guess...well it's kind of like in the presentation of everything and then the word that goes forth kind of comes with an expectation that you have experienced certain things that people in that socioeconomic group have experienced and then if you haven't you are out of the loop. You are kind of not in what is going on.

— James Black Male

Some members are concerned that this emphasis on the physical appearance excludes those who do not fit the mold or have access to the consumer culture. And much like

James, they are also concerned for the racial politics that are at play in the development of Urban Church.

Marginal in Number, High in Visibility: Race in the Congregation

I entered into the lobby and was immediately greeted by two young Black men who appeared to be in their early twenties. They were fashionably dressed with big smiles. I then walked over to the bar area and was immediately approached by two more greeters, this time Black females. They too were dressed in fashionable clothing. All together there were five greeters in the lobby and all were people of color and only one was not Black. However, when it was time to enter into the service, I noticed most of the people of color were not sitting in the congregation but were involved in the service somehow. They were not sitting in and amongst the congregation but they were the faces of it.

— Fieldnote

Through my time in this congregation I have found an understanding of the urban context to incorporate Blacks in a particular way, by both the pastor and his congregation. Upon entering into the church I saw the majority of individuals in various visible positions were Black. This pattern became apparent to me week after week. These individuals are placed in highly visible positions to greet, sing, and perform. As stated before, Urban Church is trying to portray a particular type of urban image. The image of young, up and coming urbanites, actively involved in White-middle class consumption of popular trends in fashion, media and technology. But they are also interpreting the urban landscape to incorporate racial minorities, specifically Black. Thus for the church to have buy-in from young local urbanites, they need to incorporate Blacks to some capacity. They also view the presence of Blacks to place them ahead of their competition. Before the evening church service, one of my informants, an attractive Black male who is the physical trainer for Pastor Phil and his wife, pulled me aside and said:

You know...it's like you walk in and see all of these brothas and you're like...whoa...wait a minute...what are they [Urban Church] trying to do? You know they got Travis [a Black greeter] out there in the front then they got my man Rich [another Black greeter] over there working the table. It's like they are really trying to say something...like ya...we are in the city, we got some niggas...[laughter]

— Fieldnote

Urban Church strategically places Black men in visible positions to stylize their congregation giving the appearance of an authentic urban space. In their racialized understanding of urban locations, the presence of Black inhabitants conforms to their idealized representation. In this statement Larry also acknowledges the conception Urban Church has of the urban context as what sets them apart from their competitor church only miles away. The presence of Black men in the church, although marginal, is essentialized and then placed into strategic positions of high visibility. As one of the faces of the church, the presence of these Black men authenticates Urban Church as the only true church in the city. Marti (2008) claims that although multiracialism is often a goal of urban congregations, the presence of Black individuals is the crux of their quest for integration and respect in an unfamiliar environment. The legitimating presence of the Black individuals and Black males in particular, offers a type of authenticity that further supports the church's charge to become a relevant church in the city.

In his book, *Blue Chicago*, Grazian (2004) presents an innovative analysis capturing the popularity of racially charged consumption as a component of the contemporary urban landscape. He states that the disproportionate number of Black Americans inhabiting urban communities has a profound effect on the way in which some urban spaces, such as Chicago Blues clubs, are represented and consumed. This is

not just consumption on the part of whites who enjoy seeking out this landscape of authenticity. It is a process by which cultural entrepreneurs, both Black and White, capitalize on the long history of race relations in America.

Furthermore, the representations in popular media of Black men as urban fixtures, informs both suburban and urban-based congregants of their symbolic contribution to the authentic urban landscape (Chito- Childs 2009, Vera and Gordon 2003; Johnson 2003). These representations of Black men in the media have created ‘dangerous’ and ‘acceptable’ versions of Black males to be consumed (Vera and Gordon 2003; Russell-Brown 2009; Johnson 2003). The Black men at Urban Church fall into this acceptable version which combines all of the entertaining features of the Black male representation (witty, vocally and athletically inclined, and well-dressed in popular urban attire) as well as the ability to perform middle class status, like the rest of the leadership staff (Johnson 2003). The images of Black men at Urban Church have been appropriated by the White creative team, putting forth White-identified, Black signifiers for consumptions (Johnson 2003). Simultaneously, Black members (and other minority members) are accepting, rebelling, or the manipulating these images. The racialized and consumed images of urban place are central to Urban Church’s identity politics and its attempts of authenticity. There is a common understanding amongst the creative team and minority members, that these racialized images of urban locations exist. However what is done with these images is where the tension builds.

It was 9:00am on Wednesday morning. Pastor Phil had called for a meeting with the leadership team, or representatives from the team to come meet. This meeting was in place of an evening meeting since Pastor Phil had to make it back to Indiana for a speaking engagement at the Big

Church. The meeting was held in the church office just two buildings over from the theater. I recognized all of the leaders, except for one. He was a new Black male that had started on the greeting team only about a month ago. After the leadership meeting was over, Pastor Phil stopped Travis [the new Black male greeter] at the door and then turned to me and said, “You know...it’s like when Travis started standing out front for us...we started getting a lot more strong Black women to come here and get involved...and men like him too. He has been a nice addition.”

— Fieldnote

Pastor Phil’s strategic placement of Travis in the front has proven to yield a positive return for the church. Black men in the front not only secure authenticity but also attracted Black members. Week after week I noted in my field notes that Black men were asked to be in usher/greeter positions but rarely were White men ever asked to do so—reinforcing the value of the Black aesthetic. When I asked members in interviews what were some of the first things they remembered about the church, they replied the person that greeted them—more often than not they are Black men who they called by name.

Some of the Black men told me that they were interested in leadership with the church and their current position was not what they had in mind. Larry states, “It’s like Michigan Avenue...you [Black men] can buy but you can’t own...(laughter)...it’s the same thing here at Urban Church.” This sentiment is felt by other non-White members who are in highly visible volunteer positions but receive very little recognition or buy-in to the greater decision making processes of Urban Church. This is crucial as many of the members of Urban Church join because they hope to have a hand in the decision making and development of the church. The speculation on the use of racial minorities appears throughout the church. Linda laments, “Diversity is just a token value here. It is something that the Pastor uses to one-up the other churches in the area...that’s all it is.”

Yet, these symbols manifest themselves in the identity formation of the church, resulting in a marginalization of non-White members, specifically Black individuals. I attended several leadership meetings over the course of the study and found non-Whites almost non-existent in positions of power. However they were found in second tier leadership positions such as the greet staff, singers, and those posted on the website. In addition, many non-White members who are involved in some form of voluntary leadership are concerned with the narrow use of the racial diversity within the church:

Melody and I were hanging out in one of the smaller stages in the back of the theater after service. There was no one in there. There were only five people left in the entire theater, all staff from Urban Church tearing down their signs and tables. The storage closet was right by the entrance to the stage that we were occupying so we could hear when people were coming and going. She had been gone on a trip to London to sing with an international Christian group for a week, so we were discussing her travels. Melody is a Black female vocalist on the worship team. She said it was fun singing with people from all types of backgrounds at the venue where she performed. She then proceeded to contrast it to her experience as a vocalist at Urban Church, “I mean, we are in Chicago...there are so many types of people here...(whispering)...I keep asking the pastor about changing up the music to represent all of the people here but I get nothing. I have asked three times and he doesn’t change anything. I mean why not be proud of what you have and represent the people here? I mean why can’t we have a little salsa, Latin, gospel...something?”

— Fieldnote

This statement speaks to the frustration this member, and others have with the treatment of racial diversity (or lack thereof) by the leadership. As stated previously, congregational worship is shaped by the social and cultural characteristics of participants (Emerson 2006; Chaves 2004). The worship component of Urban Church is reflective of the members and their social location as well as the potential members they are trying to reach. It is not enough to merely have racial diversity, but members are calling for cultivation and nurturing of this diverse community. Thus there is dissent between the

imagined notion of the city by the predominantly White creative team and the actual lived experience of the diverse members. As a result, many non-White members feel as though they are being tokenized in the corporate setting and marginalized in leadership and community building.

Marti (2005) claims that due to the inability of Blacks to assimilate into mainstream culture, as a by-product of various structural barriers (Feagin 2009; Eduardo Bonilla Silva 2006; Massey&Denton 2003) they are often marginalized in multiracial congregations. Although Black individuals are marginalized at Urban Church, it comes in a unique way. These Black individuals are a highlighted feature of the church. They are placed in front as necessary features to legitimate the church's occupation of an urban location. Yet, the renown they receive for their presence does not translate into decision making power or recognition in the greater structure of the congregation (Collins 1996).

In fact, Black members are almost penalized for being Black and in the city, given the perceived connotation of urban to mean predominantly Black. The creative team is cautious about any leadership team, ministry, or worship component appearing "too Black". There is the fear by the creative team that Urban Church would be mistaken for a Black church because it is in the city—an identity they do not welcome.

During an interview with one of the main leaders on the creative team, he stated that they have even moved some people (referring to Black people) from their leadership positions and placed them in others so the team didn't look too Black. Their efforts to resist White flight reflect back on Whiteness as the center of evangelicalism in which interracial churches tend to emulate and cater to White religious culture (Edwards 2008).

Paul, one of the pastor's main leaders on the creative team provided me with an example of this strategic movement of Black bodies, in an interview I conducted in one of the church offices. He said, "So it's like in our Children's Ministry...we had a conversation like, why are all of the teachers Black and you're [team leader over the ministry] the only white person...?" Paul went on to state that after asking this question, he informed the leader that she was to recruit fewer Black women. The leader, Linda, a white female with a Master's degree in education, specializing in multicultural children's curriculum, did not make any changes to the volunteer staff of the leadership team. Although I did not speak to her about this matter directly, she claims the creative team is still operating in a White, middle-class suburban frame that "doesn't allow them to see the world in a more complex way. That's why those of us who live in the city have to stick around."

Furthermore, Paul acknowledges the constant requests for changes in the music but does not want to accommodate the request for gospel music as it may send the wrong message that they are a Black church and that is definitely not the identity that they desire to take on:

You have to make sure the culture isn't shifting one way or the other...so it's like a lot of times we get pounded by some of the team some of the...I don't know what the right terms are...some of the Black people on our team...pounded...why don't you do more gospel music...well a lot of things we do already appeal to the African American culture and if we did gospel too it would create a shift...'cause you know a lot of White people like the music and a lot of Black people like this...cause a lot of people would argue, why wouldn't it go that way, why wouldn't you let it go that way, those are the people who want to come...'cause diversity is a part of our core values and in order to be truly diverse you have to manage it.

— Fieldnote

Instead of listening to the requests of their members, the creative leadership “manages” diversity through the management of minority bodies. Black men in particular, are used as authenticization pieces to legitimate the imagined ideal of a suburban-based creative team, to justify the presence of their church in the city. Furthermore, the management of diversity is an instrumental maneuver in their marketing schemes. In many ways the Black members of Urban Church, people who have volunteered countless hours being the face of Urban Church and the bridge to the local community, have been simultaneously used and left out of the branding campaign of Urban Church. In some cases they are even penalized for the racialized representation of Blacks in the city. Their faces and time are used but they are given no power.

Narrative of influence

However Black and non-Black members of Urban Church continue to attend week after week. Some do so in hopes that their repeated presence will buy them influence and access to networking opportunities. Pastor Phil comes from a family who is well known on the mega-church pastoral circuit and has been featured in many Christian magazines, conferences, and television. Members take a sense of pride in being associated with this family and some even hope to use the association for their own advancement.

You know a lot of us stay around so we can get ours...don't get me wrong, I love church, I do, I think it does great things for people, especially young people like us. But sitting under Phil and his dad with all of their connections...I mean come on...you can't think I'm just gonna sit here and let them parade us around and not get something out of it. I got some things that I'm working on.

— Larry, Black Male

Other members like Larry told me that new business ventures, promotions, and networking opportunities came through attending Urban Church. For those who are young and just starting out in the working world, a highly networked environment like Urban Church can prove to be beneficial.

In addition, some racial minorities who volunteer expressed a narrative of commitment. Even though they stated little agency in the organizational structure, they claim to be the voice of the city and want to remain on staff to help the “suburban kids” develop a relevant church for the city of Chicago. Non-White members expressed a concern for the lack of diversity in leadership and hoped that their continued presence would afford them a trusted ear with the Pastor. They also hoped to incorporate outreach endeavors in different low-income neighborhoods using Urban Church as their vehicle.

Moreover, members expressed the ability to be a part of building an organization at a young age that reflects their current position in life (Edwards 2008; Marti 2008). The majority of my informants communicated their appreciation for a church that is dedicated to a younger lifestyle. Urban Church thrives on its ability to connect young evangelical urbanites with a social circle that reflects the life choice they are striving to sustain. Urban Church affords its members with a place to be both evangelical and a young urbanite living in the city, a pairing my informants claimed was hard to come by. Members liked the ability to go out to clubs, drink at bars, and attend concerts with other members and pastors instead of having to hide that part of their life or give it up all together. They have enjoyed making friends and meeting romantic partners at the church that share in their interests to remain very connected to the culture of the city.

All of the members I interviewed commented on how much they liked the atmosphere of the church—the high energy worship, the diversity, the age group, and the dress. In their appreciation for Urban Church and their branding, members move back and forth between their imaginations of the city and those of the creative team as they began to accept or rebel against the images that are put forth. Over time, I have witnessed members change their dress to meet the expectations of the creative team. Others have downloaded the music of Hillsong, the contemporary Christian group Urban Church gets their music from, to listen to in their cars and on their iPods. Marti (2008) states that churches shape their members toward a new identity framed around new interests. Many churches accentuate an alternative identity rooted in the ecclesial community they are trying to build (Marti 2008; Edwards 2008). As members become acclimated to Urban Church they are negotiating between varied imaginations that are informing both parties of what a relevant, authentic church in the city should be like. So although they are seeking out a church that reflects their lifestyle they are also negotiating their identity with the corporate identity that is being put forth.

However, some informants stated the majority of effort that is placed on appearance, drawing in the unchurched and visitors causes the loyal members to miss out on spiritual growth—the reason why many attend church in the first place. I attended a meeting in which the Pastor Phil wanted to enlist the help of various musicians to create an artistic piece to the service. As the meeting came to a close the pastor stated, “I don’t want to go too deep in the scripture so that the unchurched people can follow along.”

Some informants who have grown up in a Christian church say they come to this church because it's fun and something different but they will go home and listen to a podcast of another preacher. I found that many members even attended a different church on Sunday mornings to supplement the lack of spiritual growth opportunities at Urban Church. By the church focusing on being appealing to those who lack depth in their religious knowledge they leave out members who are looking for strong Biblical teaching. Consequently the emphasis on getting people in the door has handicapped the emphasis on those who are already inside. After hearing a group of members discussing their lack of spiritual growth after the church service, I asked one member why she continued to attend Urban Church if she wasn't getting anything spiritual out of it. She stated,

To be entertained (laughter)...for real. I don't know. I asked myself that question the other day. I mean...its cool...something to do on Sunday. It's like an extension of the weekend.

— Fieldnote

Innovative congregations have often come to the same crossroads. After they engage a certain crowd, their practices become routinized and they are no longer relevant as the next best thing. In the case of Urban Church some members believe the church is merely focused on entertaining rather than becoming spiritually engaging which has cost them membership in the long run.

In Greenberg's (2008) study on the branding campaign of New York in the 1970's, she gave compelling insight to the plight of the marginalized in any community in the process of culturally marketing their space. Their fate is not calculated into the hegemonic visual strategy and is therefore erased from the cultural landscape. In many

ways those who are ‘churched’, people who have consistently attended church, are knowledgeable about the scriptures and religious rituals have been left out of the branding campaign of Urban Church. However, as long as Urban Church meets in the evenings and provides a place for young adults to meet people, network, and do outreach, members are fine with finding alternative spiritual outlets.

Conclusion

Throughout this study, I have explored the urban and racial imaginary of church leaders and members seeking to create an authentic and relevant church in and for the city of Chicago. Urban Church seeks to use their varied and sometimes conflicting images of Chicago as a tool to advertise itself to a young adult urban population. Urban Church targets young adults as they perceive them to be experiencing a transitional period in both their life cycle. As a result, Urban Church uses the symbolic identity of urban place to connect its product to its target consumer, the young unchurched urbanite. In their quest to develop a relevant church for the city of Chicago, the imagination of its leaders, volunteers and members are brought to the forefront. How these imaginations are dealt with brings to light the politics of imagining the imagined city.

In these politics of the imaginary, the intersection of race and place aided in the examination of how Urban Church legitimates their presence in the city as an authentic and relevant urban establishment. The use of White middle class consumption patterns, replication of the urban nightlife scene and racial aesthetics were all key component this effort. Each of these components reflected in some way the interpretation of the public culture of Chicago and its racialized urban legacy. Like other cultural entrepreneurs,

Urban Church took the actual function of a place, commodified it, and added a symbolic (consumable) meaning creating a cultural movement that ultimately mobilized receivers to act (Greenberg 2008). Urban Church is hoping their location in a performing arts building coupled with the visible presence of popular consumable culture and racial minorities will mobilize young urban dwellers to attend.

However, Urban Church has been imagined and stylized by a majority White, suburban-based creative team appealing to White middle class consumption. The overt preoccupation with appearance leaves members straddling a line of conformity and rebellion with the expectations set before them. For those who are not willing to perform or do not fit the image, they are removed and in some cases excluded all together.

Additionally, the creative team is responsible for constructing the identity of Urban Church based on racialized assumptions of suburban and urban place. Consequently, non-White members become stylistic features to reinforce the authenticization of Urban Church. Additionally, Urban Church has responded to the pervasive relationship between Blacks and urban locations by managing its Black members. Urban Church does not want to be known as a Black church due to their urban location. Thus, they strategically distribute their Black volunteers throughout each leadership team to prevent the appearance of an overtly Black congregation. Through the racialization of public and private place, the built environment becomes a landscape riddled with racially coded symbolic meaning. Racially coded themes become translated into universal truths, naturalized over time reflecting the power of the racial structure that organizes American society. The management of minority bodies by Urban Church is in

direct response to the racialization of urban space. Yet Urban Church also recognizes the expectation for racial diversity in urban spaces and thus uses its minority members, specifically Black men as authenticization tools to legitimate their presence in the city.

As stated previously, various scholars report evangelicalism is centered on Whiteness thus interracial churches tend to emulate and cater to whites (Edwards 2008; Becker 1999; Emerson 2006). As Urban Church attempts to create a church for racially diverse, young urban dwellers, they are met with the inherent Whiteness built into the larger religious tradition that culturally informs them. Their imagined idea of urban dwellers is still based on a White middle-class perception that is narrow and limited in regards to the demographics of Chicago. Urban Church is not immune to Whiteness as it the cornerstone to the racial system in the United States and the fundamental role it plays in how churches function.

Understandably, Urban Church is a unique congregation that is located in a specific place in time. However, understanding how this young demographic, who is reportedly living a more diverse lifestyle, still perpetuates historically embedded understandings of racial appropriation is a valuable resource. Furthermore as the church becomes idealized by those who are not urban dwellers, we can examine the pervasiveness of the moral model of the church (Orsi 1999; Becker 1999) in the city projected even amongst those who are trying to move away from a traditional approach to congregational life.

As Urban Church seeks to maintain this role of innovation set out by the evangelical tradition, it is also met with the task of consciously creating its own culture

that sets them apart from their competitors. Urban Church claims they intentionally chose one of the youngest cities in the country to plant themselves, with their sights set on the young adult who is currently unchurched. However, their claim may be an only partially true. Chicago is near Indiana where the Big Church is located. Starting a campus of the Big Church in a large city could also be a part of extending the brand of the Big Church. Chicago is close enough so that resources can be shared and the Big Church still maintains a hands-on, influential role in the development of its franchise. Urban Church's main target is young, unchurched urbanites. However, the location also serves alternative purposes related to the expansion of the Big Church.

For Urban Church, tackling a seemingly illusive market while not being swept away by the legacy of innovative congregations is just one of the challenges they face. Urban Church wrestles with varied imaginations in their marketing and development causing points of tension and conflict. However, they have also cultivated a community where young adults are building relationships, networks, and opportunities. Although some members attend alternate churches for their spiritual growth, they remain dedicated to Urban Church. They view Urban Church as a place that is necessary for young believers to come and find a community that is accepting of their urban lifestyle, real or imagined. Much of the success of Urban Church, amongst its loyal members is its ability to co-opt popular culture in their branding and practices. The response from Urban Church begs the question, is the evangelical tradition on the cusp of yet another innovation, focusing on city-based nightlife or is Urban Church another trend that will fade into the background?

Further research is needed to construct a comparative analysis of urban based churches located in the city of Chicago. A comparative analysis will provide insight into how these congregations interpret the culture of a public place like the city of Chicago reflecting their understanding of who resides in Chicago, their target market, and the location they choose. A comparative analysis may also provide common themes or patterns of religiosity for the young adult population and will challenge the perception and definition of the unchurched. Recognizing that young adults are the lifeline to religious tradition as they will be the next generation to lead, it is important to understand how they engage in congregations and the efforts both successful and not to retain them. It is important for academics, government officials, and lay persons to pay attentions to how the next generation of leaders orders their belief systems to correspond to their cultural and social situation.

Additionally, American churches in general, are significant social institutions that serve to create and reproduce culture (Ammerman 1997; Becker 1999; Marti 2005; Edwards 2008). “Churches uniquely provide groups with the capacity to collectively practice their own subcultures, organize for civic and community ends, and develop their own ideas about the world” (Edwards 2008:39). By creating congregations, Americans embody the cultural and religious values they cherish in ongoing institutions that give those values and traditions, a place to thrive. American congregations also express a sense of identity, value, and community. Specifically, for African Americans, congregations create a sense of agency in the face of structural inequality (Edwards 2008; Emerson 2000). Additionally, churches are the most pervasive public gathering places in

American society (Ammerman 1995; Edwards 2008; Chaves 2004). Chaves (2004) states, “no voluntary or cultural institution in American society gathers more people more regularly than religious congregations” (Chaves 2004:1). Thus having knowledge of churches at the larger institutional level and at the local level provides yet another layer to understanding the complex social relationship between American society and religion

APPENDIX A:
INTERVIEW INSTRUMENT

Church:

If race is addressed in any of the above questions, ask why it is important to informants

- Tell me about your religious background
 - Tell me about the church you grew up in.

- How did you come to attend City Church?
 - How did you hear about the church?
 - How did you decide to attend City Church?
 - How does this church compare to the church you grew up in or other churches you have attended?

- Tell me about the location of the City Church?
 - Likes/Dislikes about the location
 - Is the location important to you?
 - Tell me about some of the advantages/disadvantages of the location?
 - Building
 - Access to resources, parking, space
 - What would be your ideal location for the church?

- What did you first notice about City Church?
- Can you describe the culture of City Church?
- What do you like most about City Church?
- Why do you keep coming back?

The “Big Church”:

- Have you ever attended the “Big Church”/FCC?
 - If so:
 - Can you describe the Big Church?
 - Do you still attend? Why or Why not?
 - If so, why do you come to this church as well?

- How does City Church compare to the “Big Church”?

- What do you like most/least about the “Big Church”?

Congregation:

- How would you describe the congregation at City Church?
 - If **race is mentioned** ask is that something you expected? Why or Why not?
 - How does the church address racial diversity?
 - Do you think racial diversity is important to the church?
 - **Is the diversity of the church intentional?**
 - **Do you think race is important to this (18-35) age group?**
- What are some improvements you would make at City Church?
 - What are goals you would set for the church?
 - Why are these specific improvements important to you?
 - How can the church implement these improvements?
- What would be the main components of your ideal church?

Demographics:

- How old are you?
- How would you describe your ethnic background?
- What was the highest grade/degree you completed?
- What do you do for a living?

Ending the Interview:

- What else would you like to add to the interview?
- If you were conducting this interview what else would you ask?
- Could you recommend someone else I can speak with?

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VITA

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While at Loyola, Jessica was a member of the Graduate Students of Color Alliance, a mentor to the Undergraduate Black Women's Board, and was a co-leader of the Graduate Association of Sociologists from 2009-2010. After receiving her Master's degree this summer, Jessica will be continuing on to her Ph.D. at Texas A&M University.

Currently, Jessica is a research assistant for Dr. David Embrick at Loyola University of Chicago. She lives in Chicago, Illinois.