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**THIS-WORLDLY EXPLANATIONS FOR OTHERWORLDLY GROWTH:
VITALITY IN AN OZARKS MEGACHURCH**

A Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of
Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, Religious Studies

By

Joseph Lee Dutko

December 2008

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Religious Studies

Missouri State University, December 2008

Master of Arts

Joseph Lee Dutko

ABSTRACT

James River Assembly, a Pentecostal megachurch in the Missouri Ozarks, grew from forty-two people in 1991 to over nine thousand in 2008. What led to such growth? Using ethnographic research methods such as interviews and twenty months of field observations, this study uses the story of James River Assembly to enter into the debate on congregational vitality. Three reasons emerge for the growth and strength of the church: excitement and optimism, an apocalyptic worldview, and a clear sense of identity embraced as a worthy pursuit by members. Each chapter presents theories of vitality that are useful for understanding growth at James River Assembly. In the end, this study demonstrates the complexity and often paradoxical nature of American Religion.

KEYWORDS: megachurch, pentecostalism, assembly of god, congregations, ozarks, church growth

This abstract is approved as to form and content

John Schmalzbauer
Chairperson, Advisory Committee
Missouri State University

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INTRODUCTION

On January 13, 1991, forty-two people gathered for the first time in the storefront of a small start-up Christian bookstore to form James River Assembly. As the people searched for a place to hang their heavy winter coats, they were not sure what was more distracting—the sound of the book carts being wheeled into the back to make room for the congregation or the way the keyboard’s riffs were distorted by the awful acoustics of the room.

On April 13, 2008, over 9,000 people gathered at James River Assembly for a regular Sunday morning service. As the people searched for a parking spot and made their way into the building, they were not sure what was more exciting—the smell of fresh coffee from the Starbucks café or the incredible sound of a rock concert coming from the sanctuary.

The story of James River Assembly (JRA) is remarkable. From forty-two to nine thousand in seventeen years, JRA is now one of the largest churches in the United States. What has caused such tremendous growth? What makes almost 16,000 people in the growing, but still small Ozarks region call JRA home? While the Assemblies of God (A/G) has plateaued in numbers nationwide and has closed more churches than it opened in the first half of 2008,¹ JRA has experienced one of its greatest seasons of growth during the same period. What are they doing to cultivate such vitality?

The Study of Congregations

The study of congregations is mostly a recent development in the study of American Religion. The reason for this development is clear: the rise of congregational

¹ Assemblies of God USA, “Assemblies of God Trust: Initiatives,” under “Five Reasons We Must Plant More Churches,” <http://www.aogtrust.org/index.php/initiatives/> (accessed October 9, 2008).

studies is due to the decline of mainline congregations. As James Lewis summarizes, “Several factors explain the appearance of this literature in the 1980s and 1990s, but the most important is that membership in virtually all mainstream Protestant denominations had begun to decline by 1965, and concern about that fact had become widespread among denominational leaders by the mid-1970s.”² The decline of mainline churches brought congregations to the forefront of many studies about American Religion, to the extent that Stephen Warner says the congregation is the “bedrock of the American religious system.”³

Although the modern field of congregational studies has its roots in less scholarly “how to” manuals written by those within the church for those within or leading churches,⁴ the 1980s saw the rise of congregational studies as an academic discipline. James Hopewell’s *Congregation: Stories and Structure* and Jackson Carroll’s *The Handbook for Congregational Studies*, although broad in scope, helped lay the foundation for more in-depth study of local congregations.⁵ *Bible Believers: Fundamentalists in the Modern World* by Nancy Ammerman and Stephen Warner’s *New*

² James W. Lewis, “American Denominational Studies: A Critical Assessment,” *American Resources for Christianity*, 1, <http://www.resourcingchristianity.org/Essay.aspx?ESYID=bfeebe61-819a-48f5-bbf6-58a27dc207a3> (accessed October 26, 2008). Lewis gives a good review of much of the literature in this field.

³ Stephen R. Warner, “The Place of the Congregation in the Contemporary American Religious Configuration,” in *American Congregations: New Perspectives in the Study of Congregations*, ed. James P. Wind and James W. Lewis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 2:54.

⁴ For example, see C. Peter Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow* (Glendale, CA: Regal Books, 1976). For more information regarding the “pioneering” studies of congregations, see Scott Thumma, “The Kingdom, The Power, and The Glory: The Megachurch in Modern American Society” (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 1996), 10-11.

⁵ James F. Hopewell, *Congregation: Stories and Structure*, ed. Barbara Wheeler (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987); Jackson W. Carroll, Carl S. Dudley, and William McKinney, eds., *The Handbook for Congregational Studies* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986).

Wine in Old Wineskins: Evangelicals and Liberals in a Small-Town Church are two early examples of scholars using the “smaller story” of an individual congregation to tell the “larger story” of trends in American Religion.⁶ Ammerman particularly has contributed a great deal to this field. Her *Congregation and Community* illuminates the social importance of these weekly voluntary gatherings. Using observations, interviews, and surveys, she looks specifically at nine communities that are “a window on the continuing importance of religious gathering places in the nation’s cultural landscape.”⁷ Almost ten years later, Ammerman’s *Pillars of Faith: American Congregations and Their Partners* draws on her twenty years of experience in the field to produce a broad picture of America’s communities of faith exploring what people do in their local congregations, why they do it, and how they accomplish what they do.⁸

Interest in congregations has also motivated several nationwide studies to be conducted and made available to the public through the internet. The Faith Communities Today (FACT) project (<http://fact.hartsem.edu>) is a massive survey of 14,301 congregations in the U.S. completed in the spring of 2001. FACT claims to be “the largest survey ever of congregations.”⁹ The project, partially funded by the Lilly

⁶ Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Bible Believers: Fundamentalists in the Modern World* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University, 1987); Stephen R. Warner, *New Wine in Old Wineskins: Evangelicals and Liberals in a Small-Town Church* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1988). Ammerman relates her study to the Protestant Fundamentalist movement, while Warner applies his to Mainline Protestantism.

⁷ Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Congregation and Community* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University, 1997), 370.

⁸ Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Pillars of Faith: American Congregations and Their Partners* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 2005). Ammerman has also contributed to more practical guides on how to observe congregations. See Nancy Tatom Ammerman et al., *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998).

⁹ Faith Communities Today, “Information about the Research Partners that produce Faith Communities Today,” <http://fact.hartsem.edu/about.html> (accessed October 9, 2008).

Endowment and coordinated by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, is a joint effort of forty-four denominations and faith traditions done “to assess religious life in the U.S. on the congregational level.”¹⁰ The FACT website contains dozens of articles, statistics, and topical findings from the survey. A summary and statistical results for each participating faith group can also be viewed from the website.¹¹ Whereas the FACT study focuses mostly on congregations and their leaders, the U.S. Congregational Life Survey (www.uscongregations.org) uses input from 300,000 worshipers in more than 2,000 congregations across many denominations in the U.S. The result is “the largest and most representative profile of worshipers and their congregations ever developed in the United States.”¹² The website offers research reports and summaries and focuses especially on the topics of church growth and congregational vitality.

Megachurches. The rise of megachurches¹³ in American culture over the last thirty years has also caught the attention of scholars interested in congregations. Again, the initial studies were written primarily outside the academic world and were written for church leaders interested in growing their congregations.¹⁴ But scholars soon realized

¹⁰ Faith Communities Today, “Assemblies of God Today,” http://fact.hartsem.edu/denom/assembliesof_god_today.htm (accessed May 9, 2007).

¹¹ Faith Communities Today, “Partners of Faith Communities Today (FACT) and the Cooperative Congregations Studies Partnership (CCSP),” <http://fact.hartsem.edu/partners/index.html> (accessed May 9, 2007).

¹² U.S. Congregations, “The U.S. Congregational Life Survey: A National and International Study of Congregations,” <http://www.uscongregations.org/index.htm> (accessed September 18, 2008).

¹³ A megachurch is defined as any church with a weekly attendance over 2,000 (Scott Thumma, Dave Travis, and Warren Bird, “Megachurches Today 2005,” Hartford Institute for Religion Research, http://hrr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/megastoday2005_summaryreport.html [accessed May 9, 2007]). The authors of this article will be referred to only as Thumma throughout the rest of this work.

¹⁴ For examples, see Lyle E. Schaller, *The Multiple Staff and the Larger Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980); Elmer Towns, *The Ten Largest Sunday Schools* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1969); Elmer Towns, *America’s Fastest Growing Churches* (Nashville: Impact Books, 1972). For a good review

that the study of megachurches “has much to say about both the spiritual needs and cultural realities of a significant segment of American society”;¹⁵ therefore, several studies soon appeared.¹⁶

Donald Miller calls these megachurches “new paradigm churches” in his study of three movements that he believes fit the definition: Calvary Chapel, Vineyard Christian Fellowship, and Hope Chapel. He uses over two hundred field visits to congregations along with two hundred interviews to tell the changing story of Christianity in the new millennium. At about the same time, Scott Thumma wrote a 575-page dissertation that uses methods of participant observation, interviews, surveys, and archival records to create an “ethnographic social history” of Atlanta-area megachurch The Cathedral of the Holy Spirit.¹⁷ Thumma’s study follows in the tradition of Ammerman and Warner in that it attempts “to describe a religious phenomenon, the rise of megachurches, through the lens of an in-depth examination of one such congregation.”¹⁸ Similarly, Kimon Howland Sargeant uses Bill Hybel’s Willow Creek megachurch as the “empirical basis” for his study of a segment of megachurches that he calls seeker churches.¹⁹ Sargeant focuses on

of megachurch literature through the mid-1990s, see Thumma, “The Kingdom, The Power, and The Glory,” 12-14.

¹⁵ Thumma, “The Kingdom, The Power, and The Glory,” 14.

¹⁶ For a comprehensive megachurch bibliography, see Hartford Institute for Religious Research, “Megachurch Selected Bibliography,” <http://hrr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/bibliography.html> (accessed May 9, 2007).

¹⁷ Thumma, “The Kingdom, The Power, and The Glory,” 469.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 11. It should be noted that Ammerman was one of Thumma’s advisors for his dissertation project.

¹⁹ Kimon Howland Sargeant, *Seeker Churches: Promoting Traditional Religion in a Nontraditional Way* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University, 2000), 9.

institutions and their leaders more than actual attendees; the method of his book, therefore, “is cultural and institutional, rather than ethnographic.”²⁰

The rise of the megachurch phenomenon also produced major national studies, the largest and most prominent being the Megachurches Today 2000, 2005, and 2008 studies. All three are a collaborative effort between the Hartford Institute for Religion Research and the Leadership Network, featuring Scott Thumma as the primary investigator.²¹ The website contains survey results, articles, and a listing of every megachurch in the United States along with its pastor, location, average attendance, and denominational affiliation.²² The Megachurches Today 2005 study became “the core resource” for the book *Beyond Megachurch Myths: What We Can Learn from America’s Largest Churches*, co-authored by Scott Thumma and Dave Travis.²³ The book contains a delicate balance of Thumma’s academic research and analysis and Travis’s practical application influenced by his work as a leadership consultant. Both, however, have the same purpose in mind: “to explore why megachurches matter.”²⁴

²⁰ Ibid., 33.

²¹ Summaries and other reports from all three studies can be found at Hartford Institute for Religion Research, “Megachurch Research,” http://hirr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/megachurches_research.html (accessed October 9, 2008). Other investigators include Dave Travis, Warren Bird, and John Vaughan.

²² Hartford Institute for Religion Research, http://hirr.hartsem.edu/cgi-bin/mega/db.pl?db=default&uid=default&view_records=1&ID=*&sb=3&so=descend (accessed October 9, 2008). According to the database, there are currently 1,359 megachurches in the United States. JRA would rank in the top fifteen percent of all megachurches in terms of average attendance. One can also sort the list of megachurches by size, denomination, state, and congregation (Hartford Institute for Religion Research, “Database of Megachurches in the U.S.,” <http://hirr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/database.html> [accessed October 9, 2008]).

²³ Scott Thumma and Dave Travis, *Beyond Megachurch Myths: What We Can Learn From America’s Largest Churches* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007), xxii.

²⁴ Ibid., xvii.

Theories of Vitality. If the field of congregational studies only involved creating portraits of congregations and fitting their story into the larger story of American Religion, then the field might not create the kind of controversy and debate often necessary to keep it vibrant. It would be informative and interesting though not especially exciting or passionate. But the underlying questions of many books about and studies of congregations are what makes a church strong and what makes a church grow? Ultimately, the field is often a debate about religious and congregational vitality, what Ammerman calls the “often heated arguments over why some congregations are growing while others die.”²⁵

The term “vitality” carries with it a slight ambivalence. Some define religious vitality strictly by numbers and growth. Others prefer to focus on internal strength and commitment of a congregation. Many use the term without ever clarifying what exactly they mean by it. Christian Smith says that the word “vitality” is meant only as a description “of the social, human dimensions of religion which sociologists can properly access” and is not intended “to imply any kind of moral superiority or essential religious integrity or faithfulness.”²⁶ Ammerman hints at the idea of vitality when she discusses what makes a church “successful”:

Christian churches exist to worship God, to teach and nurture people in the faith, and to spread the Good News (in the many ways they understand themselves to be called to do that). All of those things presume that there are distinctively Christian things to do and that having a group of people to do them beats trying to carry on alone. Managing to gather an ongoing group of people who regularly do these things together is my definition of success.²⁷

²⁵ Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, 5.

²⁶ Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattle and Thriving* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1998), xii.

²⁷ Nancy Ammerman, “The Problem of the Mainline,” *Christian Century*, June 28, 2005, 8-9, <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=3217> (accessed September 18, 2008).

In the end, it is hard to separate numbers (growth) or commitment (strength) from discussion of congregational vitality. Thus, when I discuss vitality throughout this study, I will sometimes mean growth, sometimes strength, and sometimes both.

The origins of congregational studies can be traced back to the decline of Mainline Protestant denominations over the last half-century. But the story of the decline of the mainline is also the story of the growth of conservative denominations, what has been dubbed the “mainline-to-conservative conversion.”²⁸ Several explanations have been given for this pattern in American Religion, none of them as hotly debated and as widely discussed as the strictness theory, which traces its roots to 1972 and Dean Kelley’s controversial book *Why Conservative Churches are Growing*. Kelley’s thesis can be summed up quite easily: “the stricter the stronger” when it comes to churches.²⁹ According to Kelly, people want boundaries, and mainline churches were declining because they were becoming too lenient for their members. In 1994, Laurence Iannaccone proclaimed that “twenty years have done nothing to weaken the force of Kelley’s argument.”³⁰ Iannaccone took the strictness torch from Kelley and argued that “strictness increases commitment, raises levels of participation, and enables a group to

²⁸ Michael Hout, Andrew Greeley, and Melissa J. Wilde, “The Demographic Imperative in Religious Change in the United States,” *American Journal of Sociology* 107, no. 2 (September 2001): 470, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3081357> (accessed October 3, 2008). While the debate about vitality traditionally is mentioned in the context of conservative growth and mainline decline, some recent works have focused on vitality within the mainline. Diana Butler Bass’s *The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church* uses research on mainline churches to posit that a new kind of mainline congregation—“the practicing congregation”—has resulted from changes within the mainline. Her thesis focuses on Christian practices as a key to vitality (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2004). Bass is also the director of the Project on Congregations of Intentional Practice, a three-year study of fifty churches across the nation.

²⁹ Dean Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 95.

³⁰ Laurence R. Iannaccone, “Why Strict Churches Are Strong,” *American Journal of Sociology* 99, no. 5 (March 1994): 1181, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2781147> (accessed August 26, 2008).

offer more benefits to current and potential members.”³¹ Strictness reduces “free-riding” from “members who lack commitment” and “stimulates participation among those who remain.”³² Following in the footsteps of Kelley and Iannaccone are Roger Finke and Rodney Stark in their influential work *The Churching of America, 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy*.³³ They suggest that “the high demands and distinctive boundaries of sect groups serve to generate the resources needed for growth.” They seek to explain “why a costly religion can be so rewarding.”³⁴

Although Finke and Stark embrace strictness theory, they also believe that additional reasons are needed to explain vital congregations; strictness theory alone is not enough. They adopt “market principles to explain the success and failure of religious organizations.”³⁵ Thus, it is the “free market religious environment” and the “relentless competition” that determine the “winners and losers” in a religious economy and keep congregations vital.³⁶ And, of course, the mainline denominations are the “losers” in this

³¹ Iannaccone, “Why Strict Churches Are Strong,” 1181.

³² Ibid., 1204. Iannaccone states that “both my article and Kelley’s book address church growth only indirectly” (1181). This brings us back to the debate of growth versus strength and the ambivalent nature of the term “vitality.” In later editions of his book, Kelley blames his publisher for the misnomer *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* and suggests that a more accurate title might be ‘Why Strict Churches are Strong.’ Iannaccone adopts Kelley’s preferred title “in an effort to clarify my position and his” (1181).

³³ Previously published in a first edition as *The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in America’s Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University, 1992). It actually could be said, then, that Iannaccone follows in the footsteps of Finke and Stark. The 2005 edition, however, is greatly revised and expanded.

³⁴ Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University, 2005), 249.

³⁵ Ibid., 12.

³⁶ Ibid., 2. In addition to a free religious marketplace, Finke and Stark also emphasize the supernatural and “otherworldly” elements of religions as key to vitality. This latter argument will be visited in later chapters.

economy. Others have followed the market theory of Finke and Stark, most notably Stephen Warner, who argues that “a new paradigm is emerging in [the] field, the crux of which is that organized religion thrives in the United States in an open market system.”³⁷ Miller’s *Reinventing American Protestantism* is replete with market terminology. He argues that new paradigm churches respond better “to the needs of their clientele” than mainline churches that are “losing their market share.”³⁸ More recently, James B. Twitchell uses the spiritual marketplace analogy to explain the evangelical “product”—“pastorpreneurs” using evangelizing as “selling” and celebrating a convert as a “sale.”³⁹

Both competitive marketing theory and strictness theory have met with sharp criticism and critiques of inadequacy.⁴⁰ In his work on American evangelicals, Christian Smith says we must “move beyond the economistic” language.⁴¹ He does think the market theory is a good framework to explain evangelicalism’s vitality, but he seeks to

³⁷ R. Stephen Warner, “Work in Progress toward a New Paradigm for the Sociological Study of Religion in the United States,” *American Journal of Sociology* 98, no. 5 (March 1993): 1044, <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=00029602%28199303%2998%3A5%3C1044%3AWIPTAN%3E2.0.CO%3B2-A> (accessed August 28, 2007). Warner gives a great review of the literature that shows that this “new paradigm” is emerging.

³⁸ Donald E. Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1997), 3, 4. Miller states that the marketplace perspective of Finke and Stark is “useful” for explaining the growth of new paradigm churches (3).

³⁹ James B. Twitchell, *Shopping for God: How Christianity Went from In Your Heart to In Your Face* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007).

⁴⁰ I am not implying that these are the only two theories of religious vitality, but they are probably the most popular, especially in discussion of congregational vitality. For other theories, see Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, 67-88. James Spickard discusses six “narratives” or “stories” in the study of religion. His work does not focus on congregations specifically, but is still a good overview of theories of why some congregations grow (“What is Happening to Religion? Six Sociological Narratives,” (2003), http://www.ku.dk/Satsning/Religion/indhold/publikationer/working_papers/what_is_happened.PDF (accessed October 9, 2008).

⁴¹ Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, xi.

take the theory “in a new direction.”⁴² Ammerman states that strictness theory is “insufficient” and unhelpful in explaining membership declines in the mainline churches.⁴³ Michael Hout, Andrew Greeley, and Melissa Wilde argue that so far all theories attempting to explain the decline of mainline denominations are wrong. They prefer to look instead at “demographic imperative” or a “differential natural increase”—women from conservative denominations had more children than women from the mainline:

Most observers who offered an explanation for mainline decline asserted that Protestants were switching from mainline to conservative denominations at a faster pace in the 1970s and 1980s than they had in the 1950s and 1960s. They were wrong. Cohorts show no trend and only slight variation in the rate of switching from mainline to conservative denominations. The variations are so slight that mainline-to-conservative switching makes no contribution at all to mainline decline or conservative growth. The explanation for the changing shape of U.S. Protestantism is, therefore, demographic, not ideological.⁴⁴

While scholars have argued over how to explain the vitality of American Religion, most agree on one thing: certain churches—mostly conservative ones—are growing more than others. But where does this leave us? How do we define and explain congregational vitality? Which theory is the right one? For the purpose of this work, I will adopt the view of Nancy Ammerman. To Ammerman, the answer is all of them and none of them. None of the theories by themselves are sufficient for explaining why churches grow or why they are strong. But all of them may have some insight into why

⁴² Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, 88.

⁴³ Nancy T. Ammerman, “Studying Everyday Religion: Challenges for the Future,” in *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives*, ed. Nancy T. Ammerman (New York: Oxford University, 2007), 219. Ammerman also gives a similar critique in “The Problem of the Mainline.” See also Gerald Marwell, “We Still Don’t Know if Strict Churches are Strong, Much Less Why: Comment on Iannaccone,” *American Journal of Sociology* 101, no. 4 (January 1996), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2782242> (accessed August 26, 2008).

⁴⁴ Hout, Greeley, and Wilde, “The Demographic Imperative,” 497.

some churches grow or why people choose to leave one church in favor of another.

Ammerman states that religious action “is sometimes oriented toward belonging, sometimes toward desired rewards, sometimes toward communion (or relationship), sometimes toward ecstasy, and sometimes toward moral guidance. Attempts to explain religious action that eliminate that human complexity may explain nothing at all.”⁴⁵

Therefore, I will use the theories discussed above as well as other theories throughout this work at times where they seem to help explain growth or strength at James River Assembly. I will not offer one main reason for the growth of either James River or conservative Protestantism in general. Rather, I will present several potential reasons without claiming that these are *the* reasons or suggesting that these same reasons will work for other churches or in other areas of the country. Before I discuss these reasons for growth at JRA, I must explain how I came to these conclusions.

Methodology

The primary mode of research for this project is ethnographic. From February 2007 to September 2008, a twenty-month period, I observed and researched JRA. I observed over one hundred events during that time period, including Sunday morning services, Sunday night services, Wednesday night services, youth services, church outreach events, classes, meetings, orientations, conferences, dinners, trainings, small group meetings, and more. My field observations resulted in over 150 pages of computer-generated field notes. During my observations at all events, I tried to be as sensitive as possible to each of the physical senses: sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste. I observed

⁴⁵ Ammerman, “Studying Everyday Religion,” 227. Ammerman is mostly talking about religious action on the interpersonal level, but her comment certainly applies to congregational studies.

body movements, voice intonation, facial expressions, dress, material “props,” and anything else I could record. For the main Sunday morning gathering, I brought with me an observation sheet outlining the main areas of interest or parts of the service in order to aid my note taking.

In addition to field observations, I conducted twelve one-to-three-hour interviews.⁴⁶ The interviews consisted of open-ended questions intended to encourage the interviewee talk about what was important to him or her (as opposed to me). The interviews were conducted before an outline for this project was conceived; thus, the interviews helped form this project, not vice-versa. Four of the interviews were with pastoral staff, and the other eight were with laypeople. In both the interviews and in my observations, I have attempted to follow the advice of Christian Smith—that a truly comprehensive analysis “needs to analyze both the organizational and leadership dimensions of a religion, as well as the qualities of people who constitute the religion’s adherents.”⁴⁷ The pastoral staff interviewees consist of the three-member “preaching team” and the benevolence pastor/director who is no longer with the church. All four are male, not by my choice but due to lack of other options among the pastoral leadership. Of the eight laypeople, five are male and three are female. The interviewees consist of the following: married without children, married with young children, married with grown children, and single. The ages range from twenty-two to sixty. The lay interviewees have

⁴⁶ See the Appendix for interview questions. Questions varied depending on who was being interviewed (for example, a pastor or layperson). See Appendix for more explanation. The use of interviews as well as any other research involving human subjects for this project was approved by the Missouri State University Protection of Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (project #07226 [approved 2/10/07]; project #08260 [approved 2/10/08]). All interviewees signed a consent form stating their permission for their interviews to be used for this project.

⁴⁷ Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, 21.

attended JRA for various lengths of time, from under one year to since the very beginning in 1991, but most of those interviewed have attended the church somewhere between three to seven years. Two of the interviewees are former members who left the church after attending for at least ten years.

Concerns About Ethnography. Thomas Tweed says that “one of the most interesting trends in scholarship on U.S. religion during the last ten years has been the increased use of fieldwork.”⁴⁸ Noting this trend in scholarship on religion, James Spickard and J. Shawn Landres comment that “ethnography’s second-class status in the study of religion seems fated to end.”⁴⁹ There are certainly many positive effects of this recent trend. As Tweed says, one of fieldwork’s greatest contributions is that “it allows us to turn to the living to solicit their own interpretations of their religious life.”⁵⁰ However, the personal interpretations of the fieldworker cannot be avoided completely, and some concerns arise here about ethnography. As others have commented, “mere presence [does] not ensure insight,”⁵¹ and ethnographers can produce knowledge that is at best “inherently partial.”⁵² Therefore, before discussing the findings of my ethnographic

⁴⁸ Thomas A. Tweed, “Between the Living and the Dead: Fieldwork, History, and the Interpreter’s Position,” in *Personal Knowledge and Beyond: Reshaping the Ethnography of Religion*, ed. James V. Spickard, J. Shawn Landres, and Meredith B. McGuire (New York: New York University, 2002), 64.

⁴⁹ James V. Spickard and J. Shawn Landres, “Introduction: Whither Ethnography? Transforming the Social-Scientific Study of Religion,” in *Personal Knowledge and Beyond: Reshaping the Ethnography of Religion*, ed. James V. Spickard, J. Shawn Landres, and Meredith B. McGuire (New York: New York University, 2002), 4.

⁵⁰ Tweed, “Between the Living and the Dead,” 65.

⁵¹ Spickard and Landres, “Introduction: Whither Ethnography?” 4.

⁵² James Clifford, “Introduction: Partial Truths,” in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1986), 7.

research, we will first look briefly at two potential concerns about ethnography and how they affect this project.⁵³

The Insider/Outsider Debate. The first question of importance here is whether there can be such a thing as a completely impartial “outsider” observer or what has been called the “Absent Editor” strategy. The recent consensus is a resounding no. Old-style or imperial ethnographers sought “to be invisible recorders of an objective social world” and positioned themselves as “educated outsiders, come to help natives sort out their conceptual affairs.”⁵⁴ But this distinction between “us” and “the Other” is now seen as “naïve and patronizing.”⁵⁵ With the help of James Clifford and George Marcus’s *Writing Culture*, the myth of the impartial ethnographer mastering all he or she surveys has been put to rest.⁵⁶ Instead, new-style or post-colonial ethnographers realize that “the field includes the ethnographer himself or herself”⁵⁷ and “the self is contaminant in social

⁵³ Although I will also draw from other sources as well as my own reflections for this discussion, these concerns as well many others are found in Spickard, Landres, and McGuire, *Personal Knowledge and Beyond*.

⁵⁴ James V. Spickard, “On the Epistemology of Post-Colonial Ethnography,” in *Personal Knowledge and Beyond: Reshaping the Ethnography of Religion*, ed. James V. Spickard, J. Shawn Landres, and Meredith B. McGuire (New York: New York University, 2002), 241, 247.

⁵⁵ Robert Cochran, *Singing in Zion: Music and Song in the Life of an Arkansas Family* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas, 1999), 11. Although the subject of Cochran’s book is not applicable to this study, the first section of his ethnographic work raises some important issues and questions about ethnography.

⁵⁶ James Clifford and George Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

⁵⁷ J. Shawn Landres, “Being (in) the Field: Defining Ethnography in Southern California and Central Slovakia,” in *Personal Knowledge and Beyond: Reshaping the Ethnography of Religion*, ed. James V. Spickard, J. Shawn Landres, and Meredith B. McGuire (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 102.

research.”⁵⁸ Therefore, a call has been issued by ethnographers of religion “to be as clear as possible about our . . . location”⁵⁹ in the field and how far inside or outside the researcher is with regard to the group he or she is studying.

My Position in James River Assembly. In order to avoid the appearance of an impartial “outsider” observer—which I am not—I must give a brief history of my religious background and my role at JRA. I do not do this to satisfy the reader’s curiosity or to satisfy some need for self-disclosure. Rather, it will help give the reader the interpretive frame necessary for what will be written in later chapters since, whether I want it to or not, my personal experience affects my interpretation.

Much of my religious experience has been influenced by the faith tradition of the A/G and Pentecostalism in general: I was “saved,” baptized, and discipled in an A/G church in my late teen years, was baptized in the Holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking in tongues, attended an A/G institution for my undergraduate work, am an ordained minister in the A/G, and have worked on staff at both A/G and Pentecostal churches. I first began officially attending JRA in September 2006, mostly because my soon-to-be wife had already been attending there for three years. We eventually became members and have functioned in several leadership roles since then, including teaching Sunday school classes, praying for the sick on a weekly basis during the Sunday morning services, and leading a small group. We consider ourselves committed members who enjoy participating in the mission of the church.

⁵⁸ Lynn Davidman, “Truth, Subjectivity, and Ethnographic Research,” in *Personal Knowledge and Beyond: Reshaping the Ethnography of Religion*, ed. James V. Spickard, J. Shawn Landres, and Meredith B. McGuire (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 20.

⁵⁹ Tweed, “Between the Living and the Dead,” 73.

Despite the involvement listed above, I still have been somewhat of an “outsider” for much of my time at JRA. I had only been attending the church for five months before I began my research for this project. Therefore, in the twenty months since then, I have played the role of participant-observer, feeling like both an insider and an outsider. At times, I have found myself feeling what Robert Orsi calls the “predicament of many scholars of religion,” namely, not being in or out enough of a tradition.⁶⁰ I also experienced the challenge of “when a scholar sets out to study what is or had been his or her own religious culture.”⁶¹ I often felt the “sense of intrusion, of interrupting and prying.”⁶² But, in the end, I am an insider. I am still attending JRA at the time of writing, and I plan to stay there when finished.⁶³

Applications for This Project. The question involved in the insider/outsider problem and especially in participant observation is this: “Does joining the group one is

⁶⁰ Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 2005), 151.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., 160.

⁶³ My present position at the church is one thing that may separate my work from many others. It is often “fashionable” in ethnography to study groups that the ethnographer was once involved in but is no longer. This position may help the ethnographer claim that he or she can relate as an “insider” and are sympathetic to their subjects while still claiming the “outsider” status necessary for impartial observation. One example would be Thumma’s dissertation: “Although the Charismatic Christian perspective was no longer my way of understanding God or framing my spiritual experiences, I was still sympathetic to this religious form” (“The Kingdom, The Power, and The Glory,” 21). Another example would be Grant Wacker (although he is a historian, not an ethnographer), who grew up Pentecostal, left the tradition, and is now a premier historian of American Pentecostalism. He comments: “I hope that being 50 percent outsider and 50 percent insider is an asset that enables me to combine the cool eye of the critic with the warm heart of the believer” (*Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2001], x). For better or for worse with regard to this project, my relationship with the faith tradition and group of people under study is that the Pentecostal perspective *is* my primary way of understanding God and framing my spiritual experiences. However, the views and perspectives of JRA and its members given in this work are not necessarily the same as my own. But even if I disagree with JRA on theological positions or approaches, I still have chosen it as the community of believers that I wish to belong to.

studying make a fieldworker's knowledge less—or more—authoritative?"⁶⁴ Certainly, the old model of ethnography encouraged the field worker to keep a strict social and intellectual distance from his or her subjects, but as has been argued this is no longer the case. There are definite advantages to being an outsider; for instance, the outsider may see things the insider does not. But the inverse is also true. I do not wish to argue that an insider's perspective is superior or produces more authentic analysis, but I do contend that the insider's perspective and work are at least equally important and valid as the outsider's and that there needs to be a place for insider accounts in the social-scientific study of religion. The following comments from Robert Cochran may be helpful:

No intrinsic incompatibility stands between personal attachment and professional competence. A family physician who is a personal friend is not therefore less competent in her caring for my children; the electrician who wires my house is not befuddled in his work by the fact the he is my brother. . . . What fuels investigation, after all, is not that cool dispassion often mistakenly associated with "scientific" research and taken as a guarantor of "objectivity." Cool dispassion accomplishes nothing. Cool dispassion is ready to be planted. Only deep interest, borderline obsession, attachment or animus or a mixture thereof, motivates long-term study.⁶⁵

Like Margaret Poloma, a Pentecostal woman who is a leading scholar on the A/G, I hope to be "a sympathetic (although hopefully not naïve) storyteller."⁶⁶

The General Versus the Particular. This concern stems from what has become a methodological divide in the sociology of religion. On one side are "the generalizers" who believe truth is found in patterns, not details. On the other side are "the

⁶⁴ Spickard and Landres, "Introduction: Whither Ethnography?" 6.

⁶⁵ Cochran, *Singing in Zion*, 9.

⁶⁶ Margaret Poloma, *The Assemblies of God at the Crossroads: Charisma and Institutional Dilemmas* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989), xx.

particularizers” who seek to understand specific communities of people or individuals rather than whole societies; the story is “set in history rather than transcending it.”⁶⁷

Both sides present good arguments, but more than weighing in on this debate, I wish to discuss how it affects this project. As I have already intimated, I approach this work with humility about my conclusions and interpretations of why JRA is growing. I am making a plausible, speculative case, but it is nonetheless an informed speculation. I do not claim to have *the* answers. I agree with Tweed that “no single field researcher can hope to capture an entire culture.”⁶⁸ As Robert Wuthnow comments, religious communities are “never internally monolithic” and “are internally divided.”⁶⁹ Therefore, I do not profess that *everyone* comes to JRA or is a committed member⁷⁰ because of the three main reasons I have selected. Rather, I have selected these reasons based upon frequency of occurrence in interviews and in church gatherings and upon my observations that they seem to motivate people to be committed members at JRA. Furthermore, I realize that patterns discovered by ethnographers “may easily change” and I cannot reify data “into something supposedly eternal.”⁷¹ But that is a part of both the beauty and importance of ethnography, namely, preserving story from a specific time and place; we can never go back to this specific time in JRA’s history.

⁶⁷ Spickard and Landres, “Introduction: Whither Ethnography?” 2. This whole debate is discussed in greater detail in Spickard and Landres and throughout Spickard, Landres, and McGuire, *Personal Knowledge and Beyond*. The specific terms such as “generalizers” and “particularizers” and their definitions are from Spickard and Landres and are not my own.

⁶⁸ Tweed, “Between the Living and the Dead,” 103.

⁶⁹ Robert Wuthnow, *American Mythos: Why Our Best Efforts to be a Better Nation Fall Short* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 2006), 151.

⁷⁰ My use of the word “member” throughout this work simply refers to anyone who consistently attends JRA. JRA, like many megachurches, does not emphasize traditional membership. Therefore, at the end of 2007, there were only 1,934 official members of the church.

⁷¹ Spickard, “On the Epistemology,” 243.

So what patterns have surfaced over my twenty months of observation? Why is JRA growing the way it is? In chapter one I will define the regional, ecclesiastical, and theological contexts of JRA. This chapter is essential for understanding the reasons for vitality given in the following chapters. Chapter two features the role of excitement and optimism at JRA. The church is growing because it is perceived as an exciting place where people can experience a close, supernatural God who is able to improve their lives, primarily through healing and financial blessing. Also, people at JRA are told and seem to believe that “the best is yet to come,” and this positive view of the future is closely tied to congregational vitality. Chapter three traces the apocalyptic elements at work at JRA. Several tensions emerge: the best is yet come, and the worst is yet to come; God wants to heal you, but Satan wants to destroy you; messages of this-worldly fulfillment and a better life give way to messages of judgment, high demand, and sacrifice. Furthermore, Jesus could return at any moment, so people must be found ready. These apocalyptic elements—dualism, pessimism, vindication, and imminence—contribute to vitality by creating intense otherworldliness and high demands that are essential to motivating the religious. Finally, chapter four explores the importance of JRA’s identity of “reaching the lost” and how that identity is embraced as a worthy pursuit for its members. This identity is evident in the church’s approach to money, material culture, social outreach, special events, and the ritual of the altar call. This clear sense of identity, along with member loyalty, is a major key to church vitality and to creating committed members who rally together for a sole cause.

Some may argue that this synthesis and generalizing into neat and tidy chapters is unnecessary and does a disservice to the complexity of human beings and

congregations.⁷² Here I would like to adopt Daphne Wiggins approach in her ethnographic work on the religiosity of black women:

Aspects of religious life and experiences are never as one-dimensional or discreet as researchers would like. These events, beliefs, and behaviors do not stand alone, although my use of separate chapters might imply that such a separation is possible. We should, however, be mindful of their interrelatedness. I have written each chapter as a self-contained unit more to aid the reader than to maintain rigid demarcations between aspects of [religious life].⁷³

Why James River Assembly? A final question remains to be answered before moving on. Why choose JRA as the basis for this study? As previously mentioned, I was already attending JRA before I chose it as a research topic so I was already familiar with it. I, like many people I talked to, wondered why JRA is growing the way it is without any indication of slowing down. Also, JRA is the second largest congregation within the A/G, making it an important and influential church within the denomination. The incredible network of volunteers who keep the church running so smoothly also fascinated me. What exactly motivates these people to give up so much of their time? The regional aspects of the church were also intriguing. What makes one church so much more successful (in numbers) than others in the “buckle of the Bible belt”?

Eventually I decided a study of JRA would make an important contribution to the question, “what makes a vital church?” The study of a congregation as large as JRA will also have something to say about American Religion, especially with regard to evangelicals and the megachurch phenomenon, as well as American society as a whole.

⁷² See Robert Cochran, who says that telling the story of people “is both possible and worth doing in and for itself, apart from any potential ‘critical synthesis’ it might serve” (*Singing in Zion*, 6). While I agree with Cochran to a certain extent, I do believe critical synthesis can be done without losing the primary value of ethnography, which is, again, preserving story from a specific time.

⁷³ Daphne C. Wiggins, *Righteous Content: Black Women’s Perspective of Church and Faith* (New York: New York University, 2005), 14.

As Thumma says, “the study of congregations does not just describe the religious sensibilities of Americans; it also provides one with a glimpse into American society”⁷⁴ and “has a particular resonance to and fit with changes in modern American society and culture.”⁷⁵ My conclusions will likely strengthen the theories of some and perhaps weaken the theories of others. Either way, my hope is that the story of JRA and the reasons offered here for its growth will help contribute to the ongoing conversation of church vitality. Scholars, clergy, laypersons—all are fascinated by church growth and want to know what contributes to a vital church.

⁷⁴ Thumma, “The Kingdom, The Power, and The Glory,” 9.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 469.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCING JAMES RIVER ASSEMBLY: THREE CONTEXTS

In the fall of 1991, John Lindell came to Springfield, Missouri, tired and “feeling like a failure.” He had recently resigned from a pastorate in the Kansas City area where the congregation at one time had as few as eighteen people, five of them from the Lindell family. He had come to Springfield with his wife and three young children to become the first pastor of a small church in Springfield that was less than a year old. “If this doesn’t work,” he thought, “I’m gonna go back to law school.” He would not be filling out applications any time soon.

About eighty-five people attended JRA when Lindell was elected full-time pastor in September 1991. The church board was clear about its expectations: 400 people in four years. It only took Lindell one. The first thing he told the board was “you gotta have land,” and by the end of 1991, they had purchased a piece of land right off Highway 65 south of Springfield. When they moved into the new building in September 1992, they were running about 400 people a Sunday. By January 1993, they had 700, and when they reached 1,500 in the fall of that same year, they began drawing plans for the next building. By the time they moved into that building in January 1995, attendance was about 2,200 people. Lindell describes that time as having “a lot of life, a lot of young families . . . People would line up and wait outside waiting to get into the building for the next service.”

The church was landlocked, so another search began for land. A vast piece of land lay about one mile south down the highway in Ozark, Missouri, but the owners were unwilling to sell, so in February 1996, Lindell called the church to a three-day fast. On the day after the fast ended, the landowner called: “The land’s for sale to you but nobody

else,” Lindell recalls the owner saying. The church bought the forty acres for \$2 million and broke ground for the \$16 million, 196,000 square-foot building in June 1998. On March 19, 2000, nearing 4,000 in weekly attendance, the church held its first services in the new facility. “I’ll never build again,” Lindell thought at the time. When JRA hit the 5,000 mark in 2003, the congregation voted to acquire an additional ten acres and add a \$9.5 million addition to the campus. The next four years were years of “aggressive, aggressive change” and resulted in even more growth, perhaps because JRA purposefully targeted young people and young families. These changes and more of JRA’s story will be discussed in later chapters, but JRA eventually attracted over 8,000 people a week to its Sunday services in the first half of 2008. The current campus sits on 51 acres of land and boasts 370,000 square feet of space, including a 3,500-seat sanctuary, a 500-seat chapel, two Starbucks cafés, a fitness center complete with basketball courts and a running track, and a separate youth building larger than most churches. Before discussing some reasons for this tremendous growth at JRA, we must understand the contexts in which this growth has occurred. We will specifically focus on three: its regional context, ecclesiastical context, and theological context.

The Regional Context: The Ozarks

James River Assembly is located in Southwest Missouri and is part of what is traditionally called the Ozarks. Understanding the regional context of JRA is important because, as the FACT study concluded, “congregations grow in locations where they find like-minded people in the demographics of their communities.”⁷⁶ Although located in the town of Ozark, Lindell says that the church still draws most heavily from Springfield, a

⁷⁶ Faith Communities Today, “Congregational Growth,” http://fact.hartsem.edu/research/fact2000/topicalfindings_growth.htm (accessed August 26, 2008).

city of about 150,000 people.⁷⁷ But the population of Christian County, where JRA is located, is projected to grow by 141 percent from 2000 to 2030, making it the fastest growing county in the state.⁷⁸ The suburbanization of the population around James River and the resulting middle class certainly benefit the church because “suburbanites are used to driving,” so a church far away can still attract a large following.⁷⁹ As Nancy Ammerman comments, “In the average urban or suburban Protestant congregation, less than half the participants live within ten minutes’ drive of the church [and] up to a third have moved to the community in the past five years.”⁸⁰ Thumma says that the suburbs are “fertile ground for planting and raising a mega-ministry.”⁸¹ Christian County is not only one of the fastest growing counties in the nation, but also one of the whitest. For example, the neighboring town of Nixa, a “bedroom community” a few miles west of Ozark, is 97 percent white.⁸² These demographics of the surrounding areas alone could explain much of the growth at JRA. As Ammerman says, “Where there is a pool of white, middle-class, home-owning families with children on which to draw . . . churches are

⁷⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, “Springfield (city), Missouri,” <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/29/2970000.html> (accessed October 26, 2008).

⁷⁸ Editorial, “Are Leaders Ready for Growth?” *Springfield News-Leader*, May 1, 2008. Robert Flanders gives this assessment on why the Ozarks is growing: “The Ozarks is perceived to be not modern, not populous, not urbanized, not faddish, not stylish, not ‘fast’—and not expensive. The Ozarks is catching the rebound from the post-modern, post-urban, cultural fatigue of the second half of the century. The phenomenon of urban people embracing rural folk regions is not only nationwide; it is worldwide” (“Where Is the Ozarks? You Wouldn’t Want to Live There—Would You?” *OzarksWatch*, Winter 1992, <http://thelibrary.springfield.missouri.org/loclist/periodicals/ozarkswatch/ow50302.htm> [accessed January 9, 2008]).

⁷⁹ Sargeant, *Seeker Churches*, 39.

⁸⁰ Ammerman, “The Problem of the Mainline.”

⁸¹ Thumma, “The Kingdom, The Power, and The Glory,” 99.

⁸² Dante Chinni, “In Nixa, Pride Runs Deep among Religious Conservatives,” *Christian Science Monitor*, <http://www.csmonitor.com/patchworknation/nixa/about/> (accessed June 5, 2008).

likely to grow.”⁸³ Besides demographic factors, the religious and cultural values of the Ozarks also explain what kind of people attend the church.

Ozarks Religion. In his book *Holy Hills of the Ozarks*, Aaron Ketchell speaks of an “evangelical flavor that partially derived from the preponderance of Pentecostal and Southern Baptist influences in the region.”⁸⁴ Historically, the region has featured a “predominance of the revivalist faiths,” as well as itinerant preachers and outdoor revivals.⁸⁵ And while contemporary, organized churches have become the norm in the Ozarks, some churches still advertise holding “an old-fashion outdoor revival meeting” or brush arbor revivals.⁸⁶ Only five minutes down the road from JRA sits Ozark Full Gospel Church. Intrigued by their revival-meeting advertisement of “Old Fashioned Preaching At It’s [*sic*] Best,” I could not resist a field visit.

As I approached the church, a banner that reads “Gospel Music and Preaching” greeted me. After a fourteen-song set of what the visiting evangelist later called “good ol’ gospel singing,” the pastor took the microphone and asked the people if they were ready for “some good preachin’” and if they “came expecting tonight?” As the evangelist began preaching, the audience constantly responded with shouts of “yes,” “amen,” “praise the Lord,” “preach the truth,” “go ‘head,” c’mon,” “bless you Jesus,” “that’s the truth,” “oh

⁸³ Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, 5. Nationwide, the A/G has the second highest married population (73%) among the top twenty-two groups surveyed in the American Religious Identification Survey 2001 (Barry A. Kosmin, Egon Mayer, and Ariela Keysar, “American Religious Identification Survey 2001,” [The Graduate Center of the City University of New York, 2001], 27, www.gc.cuny.edu/faculty/research_briefs/aris.pdf [accessed November 12, 2007]).

⁸⁴ Aaron K. Ketchell, *Holy Hills of the Ozarks: Religion and Tourism in Branson, Missouri* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2007), xv.

⁸⁵ Donald L. Stevens, “The Ozark Riverways and the ‘New South’: Change in the Homeland, 1870-1920,” Ozark Historic Resource Study, http://www.nps.gov/history/history/online_books/ozark/hrs7.htm (accessed January 17, 2008).

⁸⁶ *Springfield News-Leader*, August 21, 2008.

no,” “bless him Lord,” as well as clapping, hollering, cheering, pounding their Bibles, and hands going up. The evangelist referred to seminary as “cemetery” several times and complained about “cold, dry Pentecostal people” and lamented that “we’ve calmed down.”

Ozarks Full Gospel Church may now be the exception in the Ozarks and certainly takes a different approach than JRA, but being so close to JRA it does give some insight into the regional and, as will be discussed, theological context of JRA. Other religious groups certainly are represented in the Ozarks, but “the dominant worldview within the Ozarks is Christianity,” and more specifically, conservative-evangelical Christianity.⁸⁷ Several conservative Christian colleges call the Ozarks home, as do the national headquarters of the Assemblies of God and of the Baptist Bible Fellowship. Nixa, Missouri, was chosen as one of the Evangelical Epicenters of America by *Christian Science Monitor*’s “Campaign 2008: Patchwork Nation” project. In his report on Nixa for that project, Dante Chinni describes it as a place with lots of churches and no bars, except for the local juice bar.⁸⁸ Visitors often are struck by the vast number of churches in the area. People also frequently comment—and I have noticed this myself—that it is hard to go into any restaurant or coffee shop without hearing people at the table next to you talking about church, Christianity, or theological issues. Curt Cook, senior associate pastor at JRA for the last two years, describes the Ozarks as “a pretty churchy religious area” where people “still have a respect for the church overall.” This respect, says Cook,

⁸⁷ David Embree, “The Ozarks: Buckle of the Bible Belt or Haven for Religious Diversity?” *OzarksWatch*, 1999, http://ozarkswatch.missouristate.edu/v12n34/art01_01.asp?print=yes (accessed February 7, 2007). Embree gives a good discussion of the religious diversity of the Ozarks even in the midst of the dominant Christian worldview.

⁸⁸ Chinni, “In Nixa.”

gives the church “a greater influence and impact in this area than a lot of other areas.”

When asked about his perception of the Ozarks, student ministries director Scotty Gibbons replied, “Churched. You know it is the Bible belt. You don’t run into as much agnostic or certainly atheist or a ton of new or a lot of religions. There are some, but [very little] in terms of per capita or what other cities or communities would experience . . . Here, it’s ‘in’ to be a Christian.” Certainly, the Ozarks has earned its reputation as being “the buckle of the Bible belt.”

Ozarks Values. The dominant conservative-Christian worldview in the Ozarks naturally leads to conservative values. As Lindell says, “it’s not a Republican stronghold for nothing.” Chinni describes Christian County as “solid Republican territory.”⁸⁹ In 2004, President Bush received more than 70 percent of the vote in the county, and in the 2008 Republican presidential primary, former Baptist minister Mike Huckabee received 48 percent of the vote.⁹⁰ Every layperson I interviewed associated him or herself with the Republican Party. Responses to the question of political party affiliation stimulated responses like “Republican, baby!” and one person responded “Republican” reluctantly because he did not consider the Republican party conservative enough to reflect his views and therefore was sure to add the clarifier “conservative.” During the 2008 presidential race, I noticed many McCain/Palin bumper stickers in the JRA parking lot; I never saw an Obama one.

Most church-going Ozarkers align with the Republican Party due to their platform on traditional values. Lindell describes Ozarkers as “much more conservative” and

⁸⁹ Chinni, “In Nixa.”

⁹⁰ Ibid.

“much more traditional” than people from other parts of the country. David Lindell, the twenty-four-year-old son of John Lindell,⁹¹ says that most people in the congregation are “right-wing conservatives” and would be anti-abortion and against gay marriage. JRA’s weekly radio talk show, hosted by John Lindell, focuses primarily on traditional family issues.⁹² Bumper stickers such as “It’s a Child . . . Not a Choice” and “Salute the Troops” are found in the church parking lot. JRA’s annual I Love America outreach on Independence Day is described by Lindell as a “God and country type celebration.” The JRA congregation routinely gives standing ovations to returning active-duty military personnel.⁹³ If congregations grow where they find “like-minded people,” then certainly considering these religious and cultural values of the Ozarks is important in understanding JRA.

The Ecclesiastical Context: The Megachurch Movement

Numbers alone establish JRA as part of the megachurch movement. However, many elements of the JRA story also fit the typical description of a megachurch. Thumma says that “megachurches tend to grow to their greatest size within a very short period of time, usually less than ten years, and under the tenure of a single senior pastor.”⁹⁴ He also says that “the more recently a megachurch was founded the more

⁹¹ In order to avoid confusion, I will refer to John Lindell as just “Lindell,” but will always use the full name David Lindell when using his interview.

⁹² The show, titled “Your Life Matters,” airs Mondays from 2-3 p.m. on KWTO AM 560 in Springfield.

⁹³ This discussion in no way implies that people or groups that identify with other political parties or platforms are not patriotic. My purpose is only to emphasize that the patriotism of many Ozarkers is often a strong indicator of traditional values.

⁹⁴ Hartford Institute for Religion Research, “Megachurch Definition,” <http://hirr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/definition.html> (accessed May 9, 2007).

rapidly it is likely to be growing.”⁹⁵ Megachurches founded between 1991 and 2005 experienced an average growth of 424 percent in a five-year period.⁹⁶ JRA also fits the typical location of a megachurch in that it sits alongside a major highway. “I’m just a believer in you gotta be out where people can see you, and you need to be on a highway” says Lindell.⁹⁷

Thumma argues that the suburban location of megachurches provides “a continuous influx of exactly the type of person attracted to megachurches—consumer oriented, highly mobile, well-educated, middle class families.”⁹⁸ To some extent, people inside and outside of JRA perceive a significant number of the members to be affluent. “Some of the people at James River are on a BMW budget, and we’re on a Volkswagen budget,” says Melissa, a forty-year-old mother of three. Steve, a former member of JRA, agrees: “I’ve heard some people that wouldn’t go to James River because they don’t feel like they would fit in. They don’t drive the Lexus, the Mercedes, you know.” Although the parking lot may depict the affluence of many church members, the casual attire of the church also follows the megachurch trend of shifting “from the formal to the informal.”⁹⁹

⁹⁵ Thumma, “Megachurches Today.”

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ This perspective is clear when one views where JRA has planted its other main church plants; all of them are along a highway.

⁹⁸ Scott Thumma, “Exploring the Megachurch Phenomena: Their Characteristics and Culture Context,” Hartford Institute for Religion Research, http://hrr.hartsem.edu/bookshelf/thumma_article2.html (accessed May 9, 2007).

⁹⁹ Sargeant, *Seeker Churches*, 58. He comments elsewhere, “One of the most obvious manifestations of the informality at seeker churches is the casual dress of attenders” (71). Casual attire may actually be evidence for rather than against an affluent congregation. Those who wear business clothes and suits throughout the week, the argument goes, are more likely to want to dress down for Sunday service. On the other hand, blue-collar workers who wear uniforms during the week may look forward to wearing their “Sunday best.” The importance of casual attire will be discussed more fully in chapter four.

This trend is evident in many aspects of the church, but one interesting recent development at JRA is the shift from “Pastor John” to just “John” in media and print materials.

JRA officially belongs to the Assemblies of God, a Pentecostal fellowship of churches nearing its centennial.¹⁰⁰ Springfield is home to the national headquarters of the A/G as well as three of its educational institutions, Central Bible College (where Lindell attended), Evangel University, and Assemblies of God Theological Seminary. James River certainly benefits from this A/G population, but A/G churches are also a good fit for the Ozarks in that they are 80 percent white nationwide and 59 percent Republican compared to only 16 percent Democrat.¹⁰¹ To understand what influences JRA as a church, however, it is more important to recognize JRA as a part of the megachurch movement than of the A/G. Besides those already discussed, two other characteristics place JRA squarely in the megachurch movement: deemphasizing denomination and the presence of a gifted leader.

Deemphasizing Denomination. “I know James River is ‘Pentecostal,’” says one member, “but I really miss Pentecostalism.” David Lindell says that “for a charismatic body, we may be a little more reserved than some.” In her groundbreaking work on the A/G in the 1980s, Margaret Poloma reported that the “charismatic fervor” of A/G churches had been “domesticated” and “tamed” over the decades in the face of its

¹⁰⁰ The Assemblies of God calls itself a “fellowship” rather than a denomination. For more information see Assemblies of God USA, “Our Form of Government,” <http://ag.org/top/About/structure.cfm> (accessed October 26, 2008). The A/G claims 1.6 million members in the U.S. and 2.8 million adherents (Assemblies of God USA, “Statistics of the Assemblies of God [USA],” http://www.ag.org/top/about/statistics/Statistical_Report_Summary.pdf [accessed October 14, 2008]). Six percent of all megachurches are A/G and 16 percent are either Pentecostal (8%) or Charismatic (8%) (Thumma, “Megachurches Today”).

¹⁰¹ Kosmin, Mayer, and Keysar, “American Religious Identification Survey 2001,” 35.

institutional success.¹⁰² She criticized the A/G for downplaying “distinctively Pentecostal beliefs and practices in order to be accepted by the evangelical world.”¹⁰³ My analysis will show that JRA is reversing this trend in many respects, but at the same time Poloma’s critique is valuable and often accurate for understanding the story of JRA.

James River’s Pentecostal and A/G heritage is hardly a major factor at JRA. On the tour of the church given to visitors after each Sunday morning service, the tour guide, who is also a board member, told the visitors that only about 20 percent of the congregation are from A/G backgrounds. “I was a Baptist” before coming to JRA, he said, “and I still am to some extent.” But, he explained, this is okay because “Pentecostals are the minority here.” An A/G church where Pentecostals are the minority? It actually is not surprising for a megachurch; in fact, it is celebrated by JRA. From the pulpit one Sunday, Lindell shared these thoughts: “We’re all from different backgrounds. That’s the beautiful thing about this church—we’re all coming from different backgrounds: Presbyterian, Catholics, Baptist, Methodist, no denomination.” In fact, some people who attend JRA may not even realize its affiliation with the A/G.¹⁰⁴ The researchers involved in the Baylor Religion Survey give this commentary: “Do the people who attend Saddleback realize that they are denominationally Southern Baptist? They know that they

¹⁰² Poloma, *The Assemblies of God*, 94.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 242.

¹⁰⁴ Compare this to the FACT study, which reported that almost 70 percent of A/G churches clearly express their A/G heritage (Faith Communities Today, “FACT Survey Results: A 2000 Survey of Assemblies of God Churches,” <http://fact.hartsem.edu/denom/Assemblies-FactFreq.pdf> [accessed May 9, 2007]).

attend Saddleback with Pastor Rick Warren, but they may not know of the ties to the Southern Baptist denomination.”¹⁰⁵

Why deemphasize the denomination of the church? This approach is a nationwide trend. The FACT survey concluded that “denominationalism is declining in significance for congregational identity,”¹⁰⁶ and the Baylor Religion Survey noticed “the declining importance of denomination.”¹⁰⁷ Sargeant reports that seeker churches “downplay their denominational ties.”¹⁰⁸ But why is this popular, especially among megachurches? One explanation is that it enables the church to reach more people. David Lindell explains, “Denominationalism is less and less of an issue in global society, especially American society. Labels are not important, especially to the younger generation; in fact, they might be a turn off . . . We feel like the most people can be reached if we don’t emphasize [the denomination].”

Another reason is that once a church reaches a certain size, it becomes its own “brand” and does not really need the denomination. For example, 90 percent of A/G churches say they purchase at least half their worship, educational, evangelism, and other

¹⁰⁵ Christopher Bader et al., “American Piety in the 21st Century: New Insights to the Depth and Complexity of Religion in the US,” Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion (September 2006): 9, <http://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/33304.pdf> (accessed November 17, 2007). Sargeant says it is “possible to attend a seeker church for an extended period without having the slightest inkling of the church’s denomination” (*Seeker Churches*, 59).

¹⁰⁶ Faith Communities Today, “Findings about Heritage, Denominational Loyalty, and Religious Authority,” http://fact.hartsem.edu/research/fact2000/topicalfindings_heritage.htm (accessed August 26, 2008).

¹⁰⁷ Bader et al., “American Piety in the 21st Century,” 9. See also Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1990).

¹⁰⁸ Sargeant, *Seeker Churches*, 60.

supplies and materials from within the A/G.¹⁰⁹ JRA purchases none of its supplies from the A/G; due to its size, it creates its own. As Lindell says, “I think it took a while for the [A/G] district to understand that when you’re at our size you can’t really do their camps . . . After a church gets over two thousand it becomes somewhat of its own denomination. You start publishing your own stuff, writing your own stuff, doing your own things.” With a full-time staff of 83 people, over 360 employees listed on the payroll,¹¹⁰ over 16,000 adherents, and 265 annual services,¹¹¹ Lindell is correct when he says “this is a massive, this a major corporation. I mean, in terms of its assets and how decisions are made.” Thumma offers this assessment: “If anything, the denomination benefits more from their presence and that of their gifted leaders.”¹¹² The JRA staff attends conferences at Saddleback and Willow Creek and uses some of their resources and ideas. Thus, the main network of churches they associate with is the megachurch movement, not the A/G.

A last reason for deemphasizing denomination could be what Sargeant labels “disdain for tradition” in large churches, especially among young people. David Lindell represents well this belief among the younger generation: “The denomination is not really that important . . . Jesus is important, the Bible is important and as long as Jesus is being preached and the Bible is being taught and people are being saved, then the goal is being accomplished . . . If the denomination ever becomes the sacred cow then it should

¹⁰⁹ Faith Communities Today, “FACT Survey Results.”

¹¹⁰ However, about one hundred of those listed on the payroll are temporary orchestra performers for the Christmas show and the I Love America celebration.

¹¹¹ These would include worship services, weddings, funerals, special services, business meetings, and all-church gatherings.

¹¹² Thumma, “Exploring the Megachurch.” Consider Lindell’s perspective concerning the A/G: “We’re team players. If they need help, we’re gonna help them . . . we’re here to cheer them on.”

probably be slaughtered.” The church’s name is significant to this discussion. Sargeant says a seeker church may often drop or “hide” the denomination from the official name of the church. Instead, they “choose to identify themselves with the particular area or neighborhood where they are located.”¹¹³ Thus, instead of a traditional name like First Assembly of God, we see James River Assembly.

It should not be concluded that JRA shares nothing with the A/G or Pentecostalism. In fact, as we will later see, JRA holds very common A/G positions and Pentecostal perspectives on many things, and many of its members speak, pray, and worship in what most would consider Pentecostal fashion. The membership class takes prospective members through the Sixteen Fundamental Truths of the A/G, and JRA frequently collaborates with the local A/G educational institutions. My argument is that JRA influences the A/G more than the A/G influences JRA; JRA is most influenced by megachurch trends and leaders. “I’m not ashamed of it,” says Lindell, “cause our name’s Assembly and our doctrine is Assembly of God, so I’m Assembly . . . At the same time we don’t fly the A/G flag.”

A Gifted Leader. The senior pastor “is a key component in the success of a megachurch”¹¹⁴ and is usually a “highly gifted spiritual leader.”¹¹⁵ In order to understand any megachurch, Thumma says, “one must begin with an exploration of its central visionary leader.”¹¹⁶ Most megachurches “rest on the reputation of their senior ministers.

¹¹³ Sargeant, *Seeker Churches*, 60.

¹¹⁴ Thumma, “Megachurches Today.”

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Thumma, “The Kingdom, The Power, and The Glory,” 34.

This is, in a manner of speaking, their most important product line.”¹¹⁷ Daphne Wiggins says that “the quality of pastoral leadership is essential to a spiritually vital congregation.”¹¹⁸ The minister’s vision and passions tend to “shape the reality of what the congregation is to become.”¹¹⁹ In his survey of seeker church pastors, Sargeant reports that “casting a vision for the church is the most important” task of a pastor.¹²⁰

This emphasis of “vision” as the role of the senior pastor is certainly the case at JRA. Associate Pastor Curt Cook, who feels a “calling to a man, to one of God’s leaders, not so much to the town or to the church,” says that when it comes to the vision of the church “the visionary is the lead pastor.”¹²¹ He continues, “Any time a staff member can’t support the pastor or the vision then they need to go somewhere else.” The executive team, which consists of the six main leaders of the church, meets once a month. At the meeting, Lindell and his wife Debbie “share vision” with the team. Lindell ultimately makes decisions, says Cook, but he takes into account what the team says. In two staff gatherings each month (called staff chapels), Lindell speaks to the entire staff, mostly laying out vision “to help form and maintain the culture and direction of the church within the staff.” Nick, a former member of the staff (part-time) who still attends JRA said this:

To have a leadership staff that passionate about raising up leaders and about pouring into people’s lives—to me I’ve never seen it anywhere else before, and I wish and pray that it would be in other churches and hope that other leadership

¹¹⁷ Thumma, “The Kingdom, The Power, and The Glory,” 297.

¹¹⁸ Wiggins, *Righteous Content*, 13.

¹¹⁹ Thumma, “The Kingdom, The Power, and The Glory,” 66.

¹²⁰ Sargeant, *Seeker Churches*, 123.

¹²¹ One of the many changes over the last few years is calling Lindell (and his wife) “lead pastor(s)” instead of the more traditional “senior pastor.”

teams would be able to have the effectiveness that the church has. It's all because of leadership. There's no other way about it. They love the Lord, and they're praying constantly for the church and for God in their lives. Leadership makes or breaks the church . . . I think my favorite part of that church is the leadership.

He would go on to use words like “admire,” “respect,” and “adoration” to describe his feelings about Lindell. Other interviewees described Lindell as “humble,” “cordial, very kind,” and full of “class.”

Lindell grew up as the fifth of six children on a farm in a small town in northeastern Colorado. “My parents were moral people,” he said, “and maybe even somewhat religious, but didn't know the Lord personally—didn't know . . . the gospel really.” His parents quit going to church when he was in junior high, and as a result Lindell and his sisters started going to an A/G church where Lindell “ended up getting saved, really making a commitment to Christ in my teen years.” Eventually he went to Oral Roberts University, intending to pursue pre-law and then go to the University of Colorado for a law degree. Nevertheless, during his first year at Oral Roberts, “a real transformation time for me spiritually,” he ended up “feeling called into ministry.” Since he was saved at an A/G church, he decided he should go to an A/G school, so he came to Springfield to go to Central Bible College where he met his wife-to-be, Debbie. After graduating, they took their first pastorate in Colby, Kansas, a town of about 5,500 people. From there, they went to the Kansas City area to pioneer a church, and after about two years there, they stepped down and came to JRA. A significant moment in my interview with Lindell was when he shared about what led his parents away from the church: “When I was in grade school the church got a pastor, the Presbyterian church got a pastor that was super liberal and basically just abandoned orthodoxy in terms of his teachings.”

This experience, which seems to have had a profound effect on Lindell, leads us to the final and perhaps most important element of understanding JRA—its theological context.

The Theological Context: Biblicism

Thumma says that “most megachurches are molded around or formed out of the identity and life experiences of the minister responsible for their growth.”¹²² The super-liberal pastor who abandoned orthodoxy and caused Lindell’s family to leave the church ultimately created a conservative Lindell in terms of his theological convictions and views of the Bible. “I am theologically conservative,” proclaimed Lindell from the pulpit one evening. “He’s unapologetically conservative in his theology,” says David Lindell. Many scholars have emphasized the role of biblicism—reliance on the Bible as the ultimate religious authority—in evangelicalism.¹²³ However, JRA still seems unique in its strict emphasis on the Bible. Indeed, the reader cannot fully understand the remaining chapters without first understanding the conservative biblical theology of JRA and its leaders. We will look at this key element at JRA in three different areas: bibliocentric validation, expository preaching, and the perspective from the pew.

Bibliocentric Validation. “If the Bible says it, we want it; if it’s not in the Bible then we don’t,” Lindell told the congregation one morning. This bibliocentric attitude dramatically influences the ministry philosophy at JRA. The Bible is often cited to validate an activity; moreover, significant traces of biblical literalism can be found within the leadership and laypeople. For the most recent building campaign, Lindell used the

¹²² Thumma, “The Kingdom, The Power, and The Glory,” 33.

¹²³ For example, see David Bebbington, who lists four key ingredients of evangelicalism, including biblicism (*Evangelicalism in Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* [London: Unwin Hyman, 1989], 2-17). The A/G FACT study reports that 76 percent of A/G congregations say scripture is the most important source of authority, and 95 percent of churches say that scripture is absolutely foundational in the worship and teaching of the congregation (Faith Communities Today, “FACT Survey Results”).

model of 1 Chronicles 29 to explain why the leaders of the church needed to be the first to give toward the building and to explain why he needed to tell the congregation how much he and Debbie were giving to the campaign. Moreover, the “Preaching Team”¹²⁴ at JRA is a biblical idea because there were five preachers or teachers at Antioch in the New Testament. When introducing life groups (JRA’s version of small groups) to the congregation, one of the main points of Lindell’s sermon was that meeting in homes is a “biblical model.” He explained that the word “house” occurs eighty-three times in Luke/Acts, citing passages like Acts 20:20. In a sermon about the importance of audible, passionate prayer (Luke 18:1-8), Lindell said you will not find quiet prayer in the Bible and if you want to pray like in the Bible, “it was vocal, it was verbal.” He then addressed those who might feel uncomfortable “crying out” to the Lord: “Some of you are more loyal to your church tradition and you’re more loyal to your comfort zone than you are to the Word of God. And you’ve got to decide, ‘are we going to do the Bible thing?’ This is not an Assemblies of God thing, this is not a John Lindell thing, this is a Bible thing.” Furthermore, Lindell constantly appeals to passages such as Luke 18:15 and Mark 10:16 to explain the reasons for and importance of baby/child dedication.

Expository Preaching. In JRA’s seven core values, core value two is “Preaching the Word of God.” “The Word is paramount,” says Curt Cook. “Verse-by-verse, precept-upon-precept” is how Lindell describes the preaching at James River. His son comments: “There’s a real commitment to expository preaching. My dad’s heart is that people understand that there’s no part of Scripture, there’s no verse in the Bible that wasn’t meant for them, that God didn’t mean to speak to them, to draw them to himself.”

¹²⁴ The preaching team consists of the senior pastor (John Lindell), senior associate pastor (Curt Cook), and the student ministries director (Scotty Gibbons).

Expository preaching—going through a book of the Bible verse-by-verse—is a trademark of JRA.¹²⁵ Although the preaching team occasionally breaks from expository preaching, such as each January when the basics of the Christian life (usually prayer, family, tithing, and the Bible) are covered, they usually spend each Sunday morning preaching through a New Testament book and each Sunday night making their way through the Old Testament. For example, the preaching team preached from the book of Luke during the entire period of my observation (twenty months)—and they were already in chapter 13 when I started. At the end of September 2008, they were still only in chapter 22. In 1997, the church started preaching through the Old Testament starting in Genesis 1. Over ten years later, they are in 2 Samuel. On the weekly church tour, the tour guide claimed that Lindell had preached entirely through all but seven or eight books “expositorily.” The preaching team (mostly Lindell) has preached 71 sermons on Acts, 55 on First Corinthians, 74 on Genesis, 145 on Matthew, and over 150 on Luke so far.

In many respects, JRA fits the seeker church model that Sargeant outlines in his book. At the same time, JRA’s emphasis on expository preaching is certainly one aspect that distances JRA from other seeker churches and some megachurches. According to the seeker church pastors whom Sargeant interviewed, the “typical sermon” of “biblical exposition does not meet the needs of seekers.”¹²⁶ An example would be Rick Warren, who “realized he needed to shift from a preaching style based on a verse-by-verse exposition of biblical texts to one which would begin with the ‘common needs, hurts, and

¹²⁵ JRA uses the English Standard Version (ESV), a conservative translation with roots in the Southern Baptist Convention, for all expository preaching and as its official church translation. All quotations from the Bible in this work are from the ESV unless otherwise noted.

¹²⁶ Sargeant, *Seeker Churches*, 77.

interests' of human beings.”¹²⁷ Sargeant explains that “according to many pastors, people are no longer interested in the presentation of theological matters or careful Biblical exegesis.”¹²⁸ Unlike those of a typical seeker church, Lindell’s sermons contain little humor or anecdotes but are filled with historical background information and explanations of Greek and Hebrew words and syntax. Thumma says it is a myth to think of megachurches as having a “watered-down” theology and weak convictions; many megachurches have “serious orthodox beliefs and preaching.”¹²⁹

Not only is expository preaching the approach embraced by the JRA leadership, but indications are also given that this form of preaching is honored by God. On the Sunday after Thanksgiving, Lindell told the church that “we’re under the providential guidance of the Holy Spirit” as they came to an “appropriate text” for the Thanksgiving holiday in their study of Luke (Luke 18:31-34). As the church approached the mid-March 2008 launch of expanding to three services, Scotty Gibbons preached a message titled “Using What God Has Given Us” (Luke 19:11-27), and mentioned the “coordination” of the text with where JRA was as a church—primarily the need for more volunteers. He commented on how “neat” it is “how God orchestrates things.” When asked why JRA has grown the way it has, Curt Cook gave one of his reasons as “a deep commitment to the authority of God’s Word.”

Besides preaching from the Bible, JRA also preaches about the Bible—in an expository manner, of course. In a January 2008 Sunday morning sermon titled “The Word of God,” Lindell explicated Psalm 19:7-14 verse by verse. The following summary

¹²⁷ Ibid., 78.

¹²⁸ Sargeant, *Seeker Churches*, 81.

¹²⁹ Thumma, “Megachurches Today.”

of that sermon, complete with quotes from Lindell, gives insight not only into how sermons are preached at JRA but more importantly into the biblicism of JRA. As Sargeant says, “the weekly sermon is the most important element of Protestant religious discourse for church members—and for social scientific, cultural, and theological observers of religion.”¹³⁰

The first main point of Lindell’s sermon was “The Work of the Word,” followed by seven sub points. First, the Word revives the soul (v. 7a) both “foundationally” and “formationally.” The Word “creates us into the kind of person God can bless.” Second, the Word is sure, making wise the simple (v. 7b). “What you think about all the time determines how you’re gonna be . . . what you think, you become.” Being “open-minded,” said Lindell, “can be a dangerous thing.” Third, the precepts are right, rejoicing the heart (v. 8a). The Word “makes you happy . . . It’s better than any prescriptions you can take.” If you want to do yourself a favor, then “work yourself off the pills and into the Word of God.” Fourth, the commandment is pure, enlightening the eyes (v. 8b). The Bible “explains why life is the way it is.” Here, and in several other places in the sermon, Lindell asked, “Are you willing to live without that?” Fifth, the fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever (v. 9a). You cannot “outdate” the Bible; it is “not irrelevant.” It is “as relevant as the day the scribe penned it.” Sixth, the rules of the Lord are true and righteous altogether (v. 9b): “There *is* absolute truth.”

Five sub points followed the second main point, “The Worth of the Word.” First, the Word is priceless (v. 10a). It is to be “treasured, esteemed, valued.” “I hope you treasure your Bible,” Lindell said. He told them he hoped they did not leave it on the

¹³⁰ Sargeant, *Seeker Churches*, 78. Myself and others may disagree with the second part of Sargeant’s statement, but the point remains: the weekly sermon is an essential part of the Protestant church experience.

floor or on their dashboard to bake in the sun. Second, the Word is our pleasure (v. 10b). It is “where you get your sugar high” and is like dessert. “Do you have an appetite for the Word of God? Do you love the Word of God and long to read it?” Some in the congregation were told they are sick and dying from malnourishment and they needed to be taken in a spiritual ambulance to get help. They cannot “eat” once a week and survive. Third, the Word is our protection (v. 11a), and fourth, the Word prospers (v. 11b). In his introductory remarks to the sermon, Lindell asked the question, “is everyone equally blessed?” and answered no. Some people have super-powerful blessing on their life—you can see it. Some have moderate blessing—you can sometimes sense it. And some don’t have it all at all—it’s always one thing after another in their life. The difference? Among other things, said Lindell, is how people use the Word of God in their life. Lastly, the Word purifies (vv. 12-13). Getting together and talking about the Word and what God is teaching you is “something that is lost in Christian circles today.”

The congregation is encouraged to read the Bible, as the above sermon indicates, but also is warned from the pulpit about how not to read the Bible. In his introductory remarks to a sermon on Luke 18:24-30, Curt Cook told the congregation “we need to take the Word at face value, take it for what it is. We should never read the Bible and say, ‘That’s what it looks like it says, but what it really means is . . . [Jesus] said what he meant and meant what he said.’” Groups such as the Jesus Seminar and other more liberal approaches to the Bible are repeatedly attacked from the pulpit. In a sermon titled “Beware!” (Luke 20:45-47), Cook told the congregation to “beware” and “watch out” for the teachings of the emergent church and their “postmodern relativism.”¹³¹ The only way

¹³¹ In his blog, under “Books I’ve Been Reading,” Lindell lists *Why We’re Not Emergent: By Two Guys Who Should Be* by Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck, a book critical of the emergent church movement

to be saved, he said, is to “be a people of the Word of God.” His comments elicited more than one “Amen” and “that’s right” from the congregation. JRA’s concern for proper preaching and interpretation of the Bible extends to their sponsorship of and financial support for the Center for Expository Preaching at the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary. In a recent article in the A/G’s *Enrichment* magazine, Lindell said this about preaching: “My greatest concern is that the pulpits in America today have abandoned the preaching of the Word of God . . . There is no medium more powerful and effective for leading people than the pulpit.”¹³²

Perspective from The Pew. From what I can tell, Lindell has certainly been effective in leading people to a high view of the Bible. Alternatively, and this is very possible based on my analysis of the Ozarks, perhaps people come to JRA with preexisting conservative views of the Bible and stay because they like what they hear.¹³³ Thumma says that “one of the defining features that makes megachurches so successful is their ability to minister creatively to their local context and respond to the unique needs of their community.”¹³⁴ This is, after all, the buckle of the Bible belt. JRA’s biblicism may not appeal to the masses in Massachusetts, for example, but it works here.

(John Lindell, “John Lindell: My blogs on life, family, and ministry,” <http://www.johnlindell.net/> [accessed October 18, 2008]).

¹³² John Lindell, “Expositional Preaching—Connecting With Today’s Postmodern Listener: Interview with John Lindell and Chris Lewis: Part One,” interviewed by Doug Oss, *Enrichment* 12, no. 1 (Winter 2007): 152-56.

¹³³ One example of this emphasis on the Bible and preaching in the Ozarks is my visit to Ozark Full Gospel Church. I talked to a member after the service who is in charge of most of the media at the church, including music CDs and television programs, and asked him if music was central to what the church does. He quickly responded: “preaching is central here” and “music helps prime the people [for the preaching].”

¹³⁴ Thumma, “The Kingdom, The Power, and The Glory,” 479.

“The inspired, infallible, reliable Word of God,” “inerrant,” “100 percent true,” “completely infallible,” “the story of Jesus cover to cover,” “useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, encouraging, spurring on righteousness,” “God’s love letter to us”—these are ways members of JRA describe their beliefs about the Bible. The people of JRA seem to reflect the ultra-conservative views and literal interpretations of their leaders. Ken, a sixty-year-old former Southern Baptist, says, “If it says it in the Bible I believe it, and I believe JRA follows that 100 percent and I like that.” “If Jonah was swallowed by a whale . . . if the red sea was parted . . . I believe it.” Kevin, a forty-five-year-old A/G seminary student, spoke passionately about his beliefs: “It is the Word of God. I want to make that very clear. It’s not a myth, it’s not a legend, it’s not just a historical document. It is the truth, the only truth that there is as far as leading men to God.” “The only way to heaven is Jesus because it says that in the Bible,” says Katie, a twenty-two-year-old married woman.

JRA’s beliefs about the Bible are an important draw for the people who attend. Ken says he loves JRA because “it’s a church of the Word . . . I think they believe every word that’s in this Bible [holds it up]. I don’t think I’d be going there if they didn’t.” When asked what the most important beliefs of JRA are, his first response was “James River preaches the Bible.” I asked Kevin what his favorite thing about the church is: “For me the preaching. I love the preaching, expository preaching.” He states that one of the reasons for JRA’s growth is “because John’s not ashamed to preach the Word. And because . . . they just do what’s according to the Bible. They’re obedient to the Bible, to the Word and what God wants to do in people’s lives and they’re not ashamed of it.” Melissa says the most important part of the service is “the preaching of the Word,

definitely.” Nick shared an anecdote about a pastor on staff who had sin in his life and the way Lindell handled it: “the way he handled bringing about this, about this other pastor was biblical. And it’s something that I’ve never seen before, in a church and in any organization. The way he handled it was straight out of the Bible . . . the way he handled it was just amazing.” Katie had this to say:

I think what makes people come is the meat that [Lindell is] able to provide in his sermon. He is so intelligent, and he is so able to tap into the Lord, and I just know he’s got like a clear channel with Him. And he’s able to come up with the most creative things out of a passage of scripture. And it’s just so meaningful and so thought provoking and there’s no way to just leave not touched somehow . . . Just the preaching stuff, it’s just phenomenal. So the Lord definitely has his hand on all of that. And John is incredibly intelligent, and all that stuff works together for really good preaching and really good feeding of us . . . He [Lindell] just gets up there and it’s not preaching at you; it’s teaching. He just has really developed like a sense of family with everyone. So he can get up there and just kind of scold you. He has such a good, kind way of saying “you’re in the wrong.” Like, “I’m sorry if you are mad at me, if you leave mad at me, but I just want to let you know you’re in the wrong, here’s how you can be right—biblically. This is what the Word says, I’m not gonna shy around it. I love you, God loves you, let’s fix it together.”

When I asked former member Christi, who left in 2003, why JRA has grown, her first reason was “the preaching.” She described Lindell as a “very anointed, gifted man of God to teach the Word of God.” Nick, who talked about why his mom Laurie left the congregation, said, “The one thing that my mom misses about James River is Pastor John’s ability to preach the Word.”

There is good reason to believe that these beliefs about the Bible are also taught to the youth at JRA. A few visits to Realife (JRA’s junior high and high school ministry) serve as evidence. When it is time for the sermon to begin, Gibbons gets right to the point: “You guys ready for this? If you have your Bibles, turn with me to . . .” As he turns to the passage, he talks about the truth of the Word and says “100 percent of it, 100 percent of the time.” He then asks the students “God’s word is what?” and they respond

“good stuff.” The students are then asked to stand for the reading of the Word. Gibbons reads it, prays, and then says, “Let’s break down the Word of God.” In another visit to Realife, Gibbons’ first words are “if you have your Bibles, and I hope you do . . .” They are again asked to stand for the reading of the Word, and in his prayer after the reading, Gibbons asks God to prepare the students for “this confrontation with your truth.” JRA also participates in an A/G program called Bible Quiz, a national competition testing the Bible knowledge of students. When announcing from the pulpit that JRA received first place in all five age divisions, Lindell explained that “we’re helping students hide the Word of God in their heart.” During a Sunday night baptism service, a child answered the question of why she was being baptized: “God wants me to and the Bible commands it.” These views about the Bible from both the staff and members of JRA are essential to understanding the rest of this work and the people it features.

The Supernatural: A Final Thought before Moving Forward

The three contexts presented—regional, ecclesiastical, and theological—contribute to an understanding of the people, organizations, and ideas that influence JRA and how they “do church.” Many of the issues discussed in this chapter would qualify as good reasons for explaining JRA’s growth and could qualify for entire chapters. However, before we get to those chapters and their corresponding explanations for growth, a voice must be given to the people of JRA and their supernatural explanations. Margaret Poloma writes that scholars must be careful not to assume “that the supernatural can no longer be a viable explanation of phenomena for the educated person.”¹³⁵ Robert Orsi says that “one challenge of writing about religion is to figure out how to include

¹³⁵ Poloma, *The Assemblies of God*, xx.

figures of special power as agents in history and actors of consequence in historical persons' lives and experiences."¹³⁶ While many members of the staff and church might agree with some of my reasons for growth, they may cry foul and feel misrepresented if no attention is given to the possibility of supernatural explanations. As Ammerman says, "The theology of a congregation is best understood in its own telling of sacred stories."¹³⁷

Supernatural Beginnings. In the late 1980s, a revival was sweeping through a local Ozarks church. One night when the Spirit was moving among the congregation, a prophecy was given that excited the church and their pastor, John. "A large church is coming to the Ozarks," the prophecy said. "It will be located off the highway, and its pastor's name will be John." The church and their pastor, John, would never experience what they thought was a prophecy for their own church. But about fifteen years later, many of them—including their pastor—drove by the fulfillment of that prophecy on their daily commute down Highway 65 past John Lindell's church.¹³⁸

Lindell is quick to point to supernatural explanations for the growth of the church, from its beginning to the present. "We came here and you could just sense the hand of God was on these people. And that's a . . . really unique thing. That is a statement that is very hard to quantify because it's very subjective, you can only say it is what it is. There was something unique in God's presence, on the services, and on the people." After accepting the position at the church, this feeling remained:

You could just see God was working. I mean, I had a guy that was really upset with me for coming back to Springfield. And he was saying a lot of stuff, I had worked for him . . . so I went to see him and he, he really told me how he felt, and

¹³⁶ Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 2.

¹³⁷ Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, 61.

¹³⁸ This story was told by Lindell to the congregation from the pulpit one Sunday morning.

he said, “You know I don’t even know why you would go there” and kind of ran the church down, and I said, “Well, all I can tell you,”—and I’m not given to these kinds of statements, but—“all I can tell you is God’s hand is on those people, and whether I see it under my ministry or not, some day that church will be the largest spirit-filled church in town.” And he’s like, “And how many people do you have?” I said, “Ninety people.” He said, “That’s a big statement for somebody that just has ninety people and no building, no land, no anything.” And I just kind of shrugged my shoulders and said, “Well, I can only say what I feel in my heart.” And so you could just tell the Lord was moving on the people. So it’s been a really wonderful experience to be in a place where you can sense God moving so powerfully, and you can sense a sovereign grace.

Lindell also points to his dejected state (“feeling like a failure”) when he came to Springfield as evidence of JRA being God’s work.

That’s what makes this thing really amazing. And, I mean, people I think from the outside would view it differently, but when you know what I know . . . That is part of the miracle of the church. You can’t look at it and say “well, they had this right leader, these right people” . . . The work of God went beyond the people . . . The hand of God, and that’s a very subjective statement, but was here in a unique way. You could just tell.

At the end of our interview, I gave Lindell a chance to say any closing words he wanted to share:

I think the biggest thing for people to understand about James River is that there are times God sovereignly does things for His own will and good pleasure that go beyond our ability. We can look back and say, “We see how this and this happened,” but the bottom line is there are some things that are mysterious, that there is an element of supernatural mystery and grace that holds it together. And that makes people really uncomfortable because people say, “Are you saying you have it and another church doesn’t? Are you saying you’re better?” I’m not saying any of that. I’m saying God at times does things that we just can’t explain other than He wanted to do it. And that’s James River.

A Sovereign Act of God. Lindell’s perspective trickles down to other staff at JRA and to members of the church, even those who are newer to the church. When asked why JRA has grown, Cook’s first reason was that it is “a sovereign act of God. You can’t take away the fact that the history of this church would testify that God has put His hand on this church from the very beginning, and it’s grown at a supernatural rate. That’s the

number one thing. Without God's hand and without His grace and favor none of this would be happening." Kevin says, "This church is [pause], it's just rare in every way. The leadership, the unity. Not just the size, but there's just a supernatural working of God's power and of God's spirit on this church, like I've never seen before." "The only reason the church is doing so well," says Nick, "is because God's letting it do so well, and because the leaders are in tune with what the Lord has . . . It's God's desire to see that church grow. It's God's desire to see people come to this place." Many people also mentioned prayer as the main or one of the main reasons for growth at JRA.

An Answer to Prayer. Lastly, while the following chapters will argue that things such as positive atmosphere or a sense of identity cause people to settle down at JRA, it is important to note that many members explain that they are at JRA because God brought them there. Ken explains that in his first visit to JRA he "felt the Holy Spirit so strongly, and I hadn't felt that at any other church in my life." Because of this experience, he says, "I knew that that's where I was supposed to be." When Nick moved to Springfield at age eighteen, he was praying to find a church. He visited several churches and eventually visited JRA after finding their ad in the phonebook: "As soon as we opened the doors I felt an immediate presence of the Lord that I hadn't felt before. And so immediately I was excited. I was just like, 'This is it, this is what I've been praying for, this is my answer to prayer.'"

CHAPTER TWO

“THE BEST IS YET TO COME”:

EXCITEMENT, RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE, AND OPTIMISM

The thing I appreciate is that [the church] is positive, it's upbeat, it's “glad you're here,” you know? People need that . . . There's absolutely hardly any negativity in a service. And that's refreshing to me because we live in a negative world anyway: “Oh, my job sucks, you know, I hate this part.” You know, you go to James River and it's positive, positive, positive, positive, and you know, “here's an answer to prayer this week,” you know, and they'll name all three or four of those and so I like that, I appreciate that. People need to hear that every day. Especially when you go to church, you walk in the door and you're encouraged and uplifted. And that's the whole atmosphere.

This attitude presented by Kevin may be the most popular reason that people give for coming to JRA or why it is growing. Attendees perceive James River to be an exciting place, a positive place, and a place where one can experience a supernatural and active God who answers prayer. As Scott Thumma says, in order to grow “the congregation need[s] to be perceived as exciting.”¹³⁹ In chapter one, I mentioned that “most megachurches are molded around or formed out of the identity and life experiences of the minister responsible for their growth.”¹⁴⁰ Therefore, it is important to understand what Lindell gave as one of his primary reasons for joining the Christian faith:

For me it was a matter of Christians are a lot of fun. I hung out with Christians, and they were fun. And it was fun people who made—who just had fun. I mean not just in church, church was a part of their life, but they had a lot of fun outside of church. And I just thought they had more fun than a lot of other people, and I just like hanging around them. And . . . it was through that I came to Christ.

JRA may be strict and may require high demands and commitment, but according to most attendees, JRA is a fun, exciting place to be. This chapter will explore the role of

¹³⁹ Thumma, “The Kingdom, The Power, and The Glory,” 474. He also comments that “the attraction of rapid and explosive success cannot be underestimated.”

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 33.

positive experience at JRA. First, I will discuss the role of religious experience in the congregation. I will begin by describing how members of JRA appear to experience the supernatural through the worship service. Then I will look specifically at how supernatural elements—through the mode of prayer—are said to be at work in the physical and financial areas of people’s lives. These stories of the supernatural result in JRA being perceived as an exciting place where “God is moving.” Second, I will discuss the theme of optimism at JRA, paying special attention to the benefits of the Christian life preached at JRA, the rhetoric of change, and the optimistic outlook for the future. My discussion of these features helps set the stage for why people are attracted and committed to JRA: it is an exciting place where people believe they encounter a supernatural God who makes their life better.

Religious Experience

Religious Experience and Vitality. In their book *The Churching of America*, Finke and Stark report that “to the extent that people seek religion—and not all do—the demand is the highest for religions that offer close relations with the supernatural . . . Few want a religion whose God is so distant and powerless as to offer little assistance in daily living.”¹⁴¹ Donald Miller says that “growth or decline is linked to the vitality of religious experience” and “encountering the sacred in profound ways.”¹⁴² Nancy Ammerman states that a congregation’s culture includes “its habits of invoking God’s presence—the degree to which it expects encounters with transcendence to happen regularly.”¹⁴³

¹⁴¹ Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America*, 275.

¹⁴² Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, 25.

¹⁴³ Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, 56.

Associate Pastor Curt Cook said in his interview that the most important part of a Sunday service is that “the people that come are going to experience the presence of God.” In her study of the A/G, Margaret Poloma said that her “data suggest the important role religious experiences play in the growth of the Assemblies of God.”¹⁴⁴ This section will explore worship and the body, prayer, physical healing, and finances as ways in which people believe they encounter the supernatural and discover a close and powerful God.

The Study of Religious Experience. Religious experience is naturally a tricky, controversial subject. In her essay “Touching the Transcendent: Rethinking Religious Experience in the Sociological Study of Religion,” Courtney Bender enters into the complex debate of “what is and is not accessible to sociologist for analysis.”¹⁴⁵ She reviews the classic position that “distinction between experience and account is a ‘fundamental fact,’” and then argues that her research “destabilizes any claim that religious experience is a fundamental fact, descriptive of phenomena to which its nonexperiencers do not have access.”¹⁴⁶ Instead, “account and experience are tied together.”¹⁴⁷ In the end, Bender argues that sociologists should “move religious experience closer to the center of the study of religion”¹⁴⁸ and treat experiences as “complicated sites of wonder and imagination that dynamically shape Americans’

¹⁴⁴ Poloma, *The Assemblies of God*, xvii. However, she is critical that the A/G has had “difficulties in keeping charisma alive in the face of institutional success” (xxi).

¹⁴⁵ Courtney Bender, “Touching the Transcendent: Rethinking Religious Experience in the Sociological Study of Religion,” in *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives*, ed. Nancy T. Ammerman (Oxford: Oxford University, 2007), 206. Bender gives a good review of the key ideas and people in this debate. The starting point for this discussion is almost always William James’s *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (1903; repr., New York: Penguin, 1982).

¹⁴⁶ Bender, “Touching the Transcendent,” 205.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 214.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 203.

religious lives and American scholars' evaluations of the real."¹⁴⁹ By treating religious experiences in this way, "we are better positioned both to learn more about how Americans touch, and are touched by, the transcendent."¹⁵⁰ Thus, I will take the position that religious experience should be taken seriously.

With regard to the question of vitality, I will adopt the approach of Donald Miller, who is influenced by William James: "I am interested in the 'fruits' of religious experience rather than merely its roots (i.e., whether God or the Holy Spirit is the *actual source* of what is experienced is not going to be settled in [this analysis])."¹⁵¹ The point of my analysis is that people who attend JRA believe they do or can experience the supernatural in their lives, and this leads to religious and congregational vitality.

Worship

The Liturgy. Before discussing many of the "rituals" of a normal Sunday morning service, especially those that invoke the divine, I must describe the usual "liturgy" of a Sunday morning service. Sargeant says that while megachurch services "are innovative, they are, over time, beginning to develop their own particular format, which closely resembles, in function if not in form, the liturgies of traditional churches. Informality, in short, is not without its own rituals."¹⁵² JRA may not describe their services as ritualistic, but there is no doubt they have "a sense of timing, a sense of appropriateness and flow that can function as a type of ritual."¹⁵³ Sargeant says that often

¹⁴⁹ Bender, "Touching the Transcendent," 215.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, 24; James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*.

¹⁵² Sargeant, *Seeker Churches*, 55.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 56.

time “is calculated down to the second,” and this is literally true at JRA.¹⁵⁴ A digital countdown clock in the front center row of the auditorium faces the stage where the pastors or worship leaders can glance to see how much time is left for a certain part of the service. For each new “activity,” the clock is reset for the allotted time and the countdown begins again. As with many megachurches, there is “never a silent moment,” adding to the feeling of excitement throughout the whole service.¹⁵⁵

After perhaps enjoying a vanilla latte in the JRA Starbucks café, people enter the sanctuary through one of the nine main entrances. If they are early enough, they can choose their own seats. If they are late, a “host” likely will help them find seats. Those who are early choose their movie-theatre-style seats as a Christian rock/worship album plays and muted video announcements play on the three large screens that face the auditorium. About five minutes before the service begins, a video starts playing with corresponding instrumental rock music. This weekly video, which is periodically updated with new clips, contains “highlights” from events at JRA, both past and present. There are clips of preaching, conferences, outreaches, worship bands playing, baptisms, baby dedications, people worshipping, people lifting weights, and more. As the highlights are shown one right after another, words flash across the screen, such as “Passion,” “Hope,” “Life,” “Love,” “Live,” “Lead,” and “The Best is Yet to Come.” The music builds and gets louder. At a specific point in the music, right at the time the service is supposed to begin, people (led by the choir) begin clapping in rhythm to the beat as everyone stands to their feet. The video clips begin flashing faster in correlation with the music until the lights hit the stage and the band dives into the first worship song.

¹⁵⁴ Sargeant, *Seeker Churches*, 56.

¹⁵⁵ Sargeant, *Seeker Churches*, 31.

The first song is always fast and upbeat, usually involving clapping and perhaps some jumping around on stage. After the end of the first song, prayer leaders are called up to take their places at the front of the church to pray for the sick. During this prayer time, two slower songs are performed. Exactly three songs are always sung. At the end of the third song, a pastor rushes to the stage as the congregation claps in order to “give thanks to the Lord.” At this point, three or four praise reports are read to the congregation, and then a thirty-second time of congregational prayer takes place where people “call out to the Lord” for their needs, usually lifting their hands. At the end of the thirty seconds, the band once again sings the chorus of the third worship song again. People are then asked to greet one another and are told to say something like “I’m so glad you’re here this morning,” but no one ever says the recommended greeting.

As people are being seated, a pastor may give a quick update or report on some important events that have taken place. Also, if there is a baby/child dedication, it takes place at this point. The pastor gives praise reports or a brief teaching on giving, and, after a brief prayer for the offering, ushers pass out the paper offering buckets. As the offering is taken, the lights dim and the video announcements begin, lasting about two to three minutes. Immediately following the video announcements, the lights hit the stage again, and the “special” music—what more-traditional churches might call the offertory—begins. The band, orchestra, and choir perform the song. People remain seated, although at about halfway through the song, some begin standing and lifting their hands, especially at the climax. At the close of the song, the pastor walks to the stage, thanks the choir and musicians, and begins his sermon. At the end of the message, he gives an altar call, and those who “make decisions for Christ” come forward and are prayed over by the pastor.

They are then led off to a side room while they receive resounding applause and cheering from the congregation. The pastor then gives a final exhortation or benediction, such as “Go in the grace of God. You are dismissed.”

The above describes the liturgy for the majority of my months of observation when there were two services at 9:00 and 10:45 a.m. However, in March 2008, JRA switched to three services (8:30, 10:00, and 11:30 a.m.) and therefore had to change the service structure. Most notably, there was less time. During the two-service format, the average service lasted about an hour and a half. Under the current three-service format, services are closer to an hour and fifteen minutes. The main cutbacks were the following: the praise reports and congregational prayer time was shortened; baby dedications were eliminated, and a separate service for them was created on the third Sunday of each month at 4:30 p.m.; teachings on giving before the offering were eliminated and, surprisingly, prayer for the offering was scratched. The elements of the service left untouched were the worship and the preaching. Ultimately, most of the time is spent on these two activities, with about forty-five minutes dedicated to preaching and the altar call.

Worship and the Body. I will also discuss the body in the section on healing, but for now I am concerned with how people, through their bodily movements and expressions, seem to be experiencing the divine during worship. I cannot know for sure that someone believes he or she is encountering God simply because it looks that way. Nevertheless, a reasonable hypothesis is that the physical expressions described here are of people who either are encountering or are trying to encounter the sacred. To best describe these encounters, I will present a sampling of accounts from my field journal

from different services. Although I have added words for better sentence structure and to make the accounts more readable, the basic, original descriptions have essentially not been changed. I have attempted to include only descriptions of what would be a “normal” Sunday where nothing especially extraordinary was happening.

Sunday Morning Worship. November 18, 2007. During the opening fast song, many legs are bouncing to the music. Not a lot of hands are up during the first song. People seem to be getting “warmed up.” As the slower songs begin, hands began to go up. Some people have one hand in the air, others have both arms outstretched. A woman three rows in front of me and to the right is crying with her hands outstretched and her eyes closed. Some people simply have their hands in their pockets and are barely mouthing the words. Others have their hands on the seatback in front of them and are not looking at the screen where the words are. Many are swaying back and forth. There is a guy in the front row—his palms are open at his waist and he is shaking them up and down with his head lifted up. Some people have their hands folded over their mouth under their nose. A few people are just shaking their heads back and forth.

January 13, 2008. There is a man with his daughter (?), who looks about eight or nine years old, standing in front of him. He has his hands on her shoulders. . . . Now his left hand is holding her left hand and they each have their right hand in the air. It seems that some people are “singing their own song to the Lord” or are praying (in tongues?) during the worship. One of the stage crew guys, dressed in all black with a headset on, has his hand in the air worshipping. A woman in front of me is holding a baby while swaying to the music. A man on the other side of the sanctuary is pumping his fist; his legs are bouncing and his arms are moving. He shouts, “Yes, Hallelujah.” He and the

woman he is with are now holding hands as they worship. One woman has her hands clasped over her head, a stunned look on her face. Some have their pointer fingers pointed toward the sky as they sing. A woman has her hands in the air, her eyes closed, and a tissue clenched in her right hand. During the second song, the worship leader says, “C’mon, would you just lift your hands and bless the Lord in this place?” Most people comply.¹⁵⁶

Sunday Morning “Special” Music (Offertory). November 25, 2007. “My chains are gone/ I’ve been set free/ my God, my Savior has ransomed me/ and like a flood, His mercy reigns/ unending love, amazing grace.” The song starts out with two singers with microphones on acoustic guitars. The lights are dim, and the spotlight is on them. The song builds. Once the full band and choir kick in, about forty people stand immediately with arms outstretched. The second time around singing “my chains are gone,” about half the sanctuary is standing with arms up in the air.¹⁵⁷ Some are pumping their fists. Most in the choir are lifting their hands. As the song ends people loudly applaud.

Sunday Night Service. June 29, 2008. It is much darker inside—a concert-like feel. There are one hundred or so kids up front, jumping and dancing as they sing “So won’t you break free, won’t you break free/ get up and dance, break free.” The singers on stage are also spinning and dancing. There is loud clapping. At the end of song two the worship leader asks, “Do you love the Lord in this place tonight?” People loudly cheer in response. Song three is slower: “And I’ll wait upon You now/ with my hands released to

¹⁵⁶ Wacker says that in early Pentecostalism, “Music offered leaders a ready means for managing the intensity of the service” and “a tool for regularizing the expression of emotion” (*Heaven Below*, 109).

¹⁵⁷ Ken, a choir member, said that “when you look out and see people start standing up, it moves the choir so much . . . because we are a ministry . . . and we know we have set a good tone [for the preaching].” Ken also said about the song “specials”: “There are some songs that move me more than others . . . sometimes tears will be running down my cheeks. Sometimes a song will move me so much that I can’t even sing it. That’s the idea of church and music.”

you.” A sea of hands goes up during this chorus. The leader says, “C’mon church, let’s worship Him.” The next time through the chorus, he asks the people to “lift your hands all over this place.” Song four is also slow: “I love you Lord/ You rescued me . . . In your freedom I will live (x 2)/ I offer devotion.” This song always seems to receive a resounding response. People are shouting the chorus, the drums are thumping. The leader says, “C’mon, just lift your life to Him.” A woman has both hands clasped over her chest. Some people are very exuberant while others have their head bowed (in reverence?). There is a special song by the youth (Realife) choir: “We must go/ live to feed the hungry/ stand beside the broken, we must go/ stepping forward, keep us from just singing/ move us into action, we must go.” The end of the song repeats the line “Fill us up, send us out” at least eleven times. As they sing that line, people begin standing, shouting, and cheering with their arms outstretched. There is loud cheering at the end of the song.

The Baptism in the Holy Spirit. The modern Pentecostal experience of being “baptized in the Holy Spirit” has now existed for over one hundred years. For the A/G, the “initial physical evidence” of this experience is speaking in tongues.¹⁵⁸ Speaking in tongues does not play a prominent role at JRA, especially in the Sunday morning service, but it is one avenue in which people encounter the divine at JRA. A special service on Wednesday night once a month is dedicated to the baptism in the Holy Spirit. A message is preached on its importance, and those who would like to receive the baptism are asked

¹⁵⁸ The Assemblies of God USA, “The Baptism in the Holy Spirit: The Initial Experience and Continuing Evidences of the Spirit-Filled Life,” http://ag.org/top/Beliefs/Position_Papers/pp_downloads/pp_4185_spirit-filled_life.pdf (accessed October 22, 2008). JRA also holds the “initial physical evidence” position. In a training session for leaders who pray for people during the Holy Spirit Baptism, the pastor leading the session said the initial evidence doctrine is “one belief that I am willing to fight for.”

to come forward and are prayed for to receive it. I will look at one individual example of what the baptism in the Holy Spirit means to some people at JRA.

Ken came to JRA seven years ago and was “scared to death of Pentecostals” and speaking in tongues.¹⁵⁹ “When I came to James River Assembly church, I had absolutely no desire to be baptized in the Holy Spirit . . . I thought, ‘No way, that’s not about Ken whatsoever.’” Ken became more curious about the baptism over the years, but he “would not go to the [Spirit baptism] service where in Clark Chapel they have it about being filled with the Holy Spirit.” However, one Sunday night a guest speaker spoke on the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and Ken decided to respond to the invitation and decided to “ask the Lord for [the baptism] because I needed it, because my ministry needed everything it could get.” Ken went down front “begging the Lord, ‘please, please, let me be baptized in the Holy Spirit.’” Soon, God “showed [me] that if you’ll be completely obedient and just give everything you got to me, I’ll give this gift to you.” In about a minute or two, “these words started coming out of my mouth; I didn’t know what they were, what they meant. I just started speaking. I didn’t recognize it as a language . . . I was happy and was speaking and laughing and speaking some more [in tongues] . . . I was smiling from ear to ear and so thankful that the Lord would do that for me [begins to choke up].” Ken said that from that moment on, “I felt this power that I’ve never felt before. I felt a boldness that I’m not going out by myself because I got this in me, and I can talk to anybody about the Lord . . . It’s been wonderful ever since.”

¹⁵⁹ This was a common story from those I interviewed. Kevin, who was raised Baptist, said he “was raised that tongues and the baptism of the Holy Spirit were of the devil.” Steve also was raised that way: “If you were raised Baptist that’s what you were taught. My daddy used to call ‘em holy rollers, you know. They’d roll on the floor and stuff. I never have seen anybody roll on the floors, so I don’t know what he was talking about.”

The gifts of tongues and interpretation of tongues, as described in 1 Corinthians 12:10, are seen by most Pentecostals as separate from speaking in tongues for personal edification. These gifts are for the church body. At some Pentecostal churches, a “tongue” and “interpretation” of the tongue may happen almost every service. Although it may have happened during other service times, I only witnessed a tongue and interpretation four times in my period of observation. Two of them happened right at the end of the third and final worship song and two happened at the end of the offertory. In a service as compact as JRA’s, the reality is these are the only two realistic places a tongue and interpretation could take place. In his book on early Pentecostals, Wacker calls this common Pentecostal pattern “planned spontaneity” or “the disciplined use of ecstasy.”¹⁶⁰ At JRA, The voice of the person speaking in tongues always rises above the clapping in response to end of the worship song. As soon as the person is heard, a hush comes over the congregation and the mood is always reverent. People mostly stop moving. Anyone who is walking off the stage immediately stops and bows his or her head. After the tongue is given, an interpretation in English follows. The interpretation is given as if speaking for God: “I, the Lord . . .” or “My Spirit . . .”

The most interesting part about the tongues and interpretations is how the pastors handle it. Almost immediately, Cook or Lindell (they each “oversaw” two of them) begin teaching about what the Bible says about what just happened. The mood immediately shifts from reverent to didactic. They reference 1 Corinthians 12 and 14 and then give the “rules” or “guidelines” for how the gifts should be practiced in the congregation. Once Lindell gave the “house rules” about how “three is three” (no more than three tongues or interpretations are permitted in a service—with each counting as one by itself [cf. 1

¹⁶⁰ Wacker, *Heaven Below*, 99, 109.

Corinthians 14:27]) and how the tongue and interpretation that was just completed was “beautifully done.” They ask the congregation to weigh what was said against what the Word of God says. Then they move on.

Despite the hurried way in which they are handled, tongues and interpretation still serve as evidence that many at JRA believe they encounter a real God at JRA who is active in the congregation. Cook or Lindell do normally end the “post-tongues speech” by saying something like “we welcome the moving of the Spirit” (Lindell) or “aren’t you glad that God is a God who still speaks to us today?” (Cook). Thus, the baptism in the Holy Spirit and the gifts that sometimes accompany it are another way people at JRA use bodily expression to “touch, and [be] touched by, the transcendent” in the worship service.¹⁶¹

Prayer Requests and Praise Reports

Prayer. Before discussing healing and finances as means for close relationship with the supernatural at JRA, I must explain the importance of prayer within the congregation. Prayer is the third “core value” of JRA and permeates every service. It is a frequent topic of sermons. Scotty Gibbons preached that “prayer is like air, we breathe it.” Ken says, “I pray all the time; I’m almost in a perpetual continuous prayer all day long.” When asked what beliefs make JRA distinct, Ken responded by talking about the prayer meetings and described JRA as “a praying church.” “We believe in it, we have faith in it, we do it,” he says, “in small groups, in choir rehearsal; in everything we do, we do it.” Almost every interviewee was quick to point out that prayer is one of the biggest reasons for the growth of JRA, a perspective commonly given from the pulpit. Above

¹⁶¹ Bender, “Touching the Transcendent,” 215.

every entrance into the sanctuary is a plaque asking, “Have you prayed for the service you are about to enter?”

Every Sunday morning after the first song, the worship leader calls up the prayer leaders and reads James 5:14-15: “Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up” (James 5:14-15). The verse is also displayed on the screens, followed by “If you have a need and would like prayer, please move to an aisle and a host will direct you to those who will pray for you.” The worship leader encourages people to “come if you have need this morning.” The prayer leaders are in groups of two, and there are normally between twelve and twenty groups in each service. Each group has oil for anointing the sick. Usually, all four aisles have lines both worship songs. Depending on the size of the service, approximately forty to seventy-five people are prayed for. People often come in groups or bring their spouses or children with them.

The Wednesday night prayer service is subtitled “the most important service of the week.” Upon arriving at the prayer service, each person is handed one or two “Prayer Request” cards that have been filled out by someone in the church. The top of the card reads “Ask and it will be given to you . . .” (Matthew 7:7a). The lighting is dim during the prayer service, and the mood is mellow. The stage and screen colors are always a soothing dark purple. The prayer service schedule is as follows: corporate worship time; prayer for one another in groups of three or four; prayer for the needs represented on the cards each person received; corporate prayer for needs of the community, world, and church; a teaching on prayer; and a time for individual prayer in response to the teaching.

When people pray for the cards they received, they are told to “call on God just as if it was your own need.” As people pray for the cards, they often lift them up into the air, and some people shake the cards as they pray. Others clasp the cards between their hands. Each prayer request card, stamped with the date when it was received, is used in the prayer service for approximately one month.

Prayer and Storytelling. In addition to the prayer request cards, each member has weekly opportunities to fill out “Praise Report” cards. Both cards are stored in the seatbacks of each row and can be placed in the offering bucket. The green border around the request cards and the purple border around the praise report cards help people distinguish the two. At the top of the praise report card is Psalm 105:1, “Give thanks to the Lord, call on His name; make known among the nations what He has done.” At the Wednesday night prayer meeting, attendees are told to “believe that these green cards will become purple cards in the coming days and weeks.” Each Sunday morning, a pastor reads three or four of those “purple cards” after the time of worship. The content of these cards provides incredible insight into how the people of JRA believe they encounter God in their daily lives.

Nancy Ammerman claims that “what and how members pray says a good deal about their understanding of their god.”¹⁶² Furthermore, Robert Wuthnow discusses prayer in the context of storytelling. He says, “As prayer requests are shared and answers to prayer are discussed, the group’s members articulate the belief that they can be transformed, and are motivated to work toward that transformation.”¹⁶³ In what ways do

¹⁶² Nancy Ammerman, “Culture and Identity in the Congregation,” in *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*, eds. Nancy Ammerman and others (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 86.

¹⁶³ Wuthnow, *American Mythos*, 75.

the prayer requests and praise reports at JRA reveal how people at the church understand their god? In what areas do people believe they can be transformed? An analysis of the praise reports shared from the pulpit is revealing. Over the course of nine months, I recorded the three or four praise reports shared each week from the stage, 103 total. After analyzing the reports, I was able to distinguish four main categories that almost all the requests fit into (Table 1).

Table 1. Praise Reports

Category	Number	Percentage
Financial provision	29	28%
Healing	28	27%
Salvation	27	26%
Relationships	14	14%
Other	5	5%
Total	103	100%

The results show a striking balance between praise reports about finances, healing, and salvation. I cannot know whether this is what people are reporting the most or if this is what the leadership is choosing to report, but a good guess is that they both affect each other. There is evidence that the leadership is intentional about emphasizing these three aspects. In the congregational prayer time that follows the reading of the praise reports, the pastor usually tells the congregation what to pray for and about thirty seconds later closes in prayer. One Sunday, Cook told the congregation, “Lift your hands and your voice to heaven. Call on God. *He can heal you. He can save you. He can give*

you a job.” On a different occasion, Lindell closed the prayer time by praying, “You are Jehovah Jireh, our provider. You are Jehovah Rapha, our healer.” I will first discuss God as healer at JRA, followed by God as financial provider.¹⁶⁴

God as Healer. Healing can be a difficult subject for religious historians as well as for the social-scientific study of religion. For my discussion, I will follow the approach of Amanda Porterfield. She says that “healing has functioned as one of the most persistently compelling aspects of Christianity” and “healing is a persistent and even defining characteristic of Christianity.”¹⁶⁵ Therefore, it cannot be ignored when it is constantly present in the study of Christian groups. In order to bring healing into the center of discussion, Porterfield discusses Christianity and religious healing in biological terms:

To think about Christianity in biological terms is to think about human beings as members of a natural species and about religion as something that has evolved as an aid to human survival. Thinking about religious healing as a biological process enables us to take it seriously. We don't have to overlook or take lightly the countless testimonies to the healing power of faith that have come pouring out of Christians for centuries. Instead, we can begin to understand how healing messages and practices have contributed to Christianity's extraordinary success as a persistently vital and highly diversified religion.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁴ The results for salvation will be discussed in chapter four. They mostly deal with friends or families of the person writing the report that were “saved.” The category *relationships* primarily involved reports of God reconciling and restoring marriages and families.

¹⁶⁵ Amanda Porterfield, “Healing in the History of Christianity Presidential Address, January 2002 American Society of Church History,” *Church History* 71, no. 2 (June 2002): 227, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4146466> (accessed October 3, 2008). See also her book *Healing in the History of Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2005). Surprisingly, Porterfield’s work lacks attention to evangelicals and Pentecostals. See also Heather Curtis, *Faith in the Great Physician: Suffering and Divine Healing in American Culture, 1860-1900* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2007). Curtis argues that whereas suffering used to be considered a blessing from God and was even sought at times in Christian history, from the nineteenth century on there was an increase in the importance of praying for one’s sickness or illness.

¹⁶⁶ Porterfield, “Healing in the History of Christianity,” 229.

Porterfield says that simply “the sheer quantity” of healing stories “make healing one of Christianity’s most salient characteristics.”¹⁶⁷ James River is no exception.

To better represent the stories of healing at JRA, I will list most of the twenty-eight praise reports. Naturally, the reports are short (the pastors do not normally read the whole card—they summarize) and are lacking in detail or complete explanation. I have tried to capture as close as possible the short, matter-of-fact way the reports are read. Normally each individual report results in loud applause and occasional cheering from the congregation. Holding a stack of cards in his hand, the pastor usually lifts up the report and begins by saying, “This person is praising God for . . .” or “Here’s a person who . . .” and explains the report:

1. a fourteen-year old son who has had epilepsy since he was three is healed
2. no more cancer
3. a growth in a mouth healed, completely gone
4. healing of a brother-in-law with a brain tumor
5. healing of eyes—now 20/20 vision
6. had a lump, went to the doctor—no cancer
7. had hearing problems: “as I was walking back to my seat, my ears opened up and I was healed”
8. received prayer for severe headaches, have had none since
9. thankful because it has been five years since delivered from alcohol
10. have been praying to conceive since May, filled out request cards, found out this week they are expecting
11. had an inflated elbow from injury and while worshipping was healed and the pain instantly left
12. needed surgery to remove her gallbladder, a pastor called and prayed with the person, and she was totally healed and did not need surgery¹⁶⁸
13. a nine-year old with painful warts, a person fasted and prayed and the warts have reduced in size and some have even fallen off
14. throat problems, during a Sunday night worship service felt it healed—went home and it was confirmed

¹⁶⁷ Porterfield, “Healing in the History of Christianity,” 242.

¹⁶⁸ When request cards are filled out and turned in, sometimes a volunteer or occasionally a pastor will call and pray for the person over the phone. Katie commented in her interview that “in a church that size, that’s awesome because you know that your card is actually being prayed for, not just getting lost in a file somewhere.”

15. friend had ovarian cancer, submitted prayer requests—when she went in for surgery they found no cancer
16. son diagnosed with blindness, came forward for prayer repeatedly, the doctors now say he is not blind
17. cancer gone
18. a tumor gone
19. colon cancer healed
20. pancreatic cancer healed
21. three sons now free from drug addiction
22. heart murmur healed
23. wanted to get pregnant, had difficulties, got pregnant and now have a healthy baby
24. conception of a child after five years of prayer

God as Financial Provider. Whether tithing, building campaigns, missions, special offerings, or other projects, giving money is a frequent topic at JRA. The starting point for all financial conversation at JRA is tithing. In his sermon “Reasons Why I Give,” Lindell stated reason number one as “God is the Lord of my life.” “If God asks it, I’m gonna do it.” Lindell taught that “ten percent of what we make belongs to the Lord” and “not to [tithe] is to have your finances under a curse.” In reason two, “God blesses whatever we give to Him,” Lindell used the law of sowing and reaping (2 Corinthians 9:6) to claim that even “if I were not a Christian, I would tithe.” The third reason is “It makes me financially secure.” Lindell said that by giving, “God has obligated himself by promise to me”; therefore, he does not have to worry about the future. After giving testimony of God’s provision in his life and in others’ lives and after several more reasons, Lindell closed by saying “If I were you, I’d write my tithe today. . . . Why wouldn’t you want to do this? . . . I’m trying to tell you something that will benefit you.” Lindell repeatedly emphasized that the benefit is for the person, not the church: “If you don’t give a dime, the church will keep running.”¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁹ However, Lindell said, this does not mean a person can choose to give anywhere they want: “You give the money in the place where you’re fed.”

The point of Lindell's sermon and others like it is that giving money brings supernatural financial blessing. As one letter sent to members regarding the Changing History building campaign says, give God number one priority in your finances "and you'll see Him work in ways you can't begin to imagine." What are some of those ways (according to praise reports)?

1. a better job with health insurance
2. had medical bills and great financial need, given a nine percent salary increase
3. sold farm for \$15,000 more than they expected
4. new job
5. sold their house right away
6. got a scholarship for college
7. job
8. unexpected check for \$900 and a raise of \$10,000 a year
9. job offer that will provide above and beyond what they need
10. fasted for an entire day, and an impossible business deal went through that day
11. stepdad's branch bank was closing, but he was the only one who was asked to stay
12. got a job
13. able to sell two houses
14. needed a job, prayed and fasted three days, God provided a job
15. financial problems, God blessed them with a six-digit income in one week
16. couple received the \$550 they were lacking for adoption
17. after eighteen months their house finally sold
18. new job
19. needed extra income and got an unexpected promotion and pay increase
20. tank was on empty coming to church, a member offered to fill the tank

In addition to the praise reports after worship, financial testimonies also are frequently given before the offering, usually on the topic of giving to the building campaign (labeled the "Changing History" campaign) taking place during most of my observation time. Occasionally (about once a month), these testimonies are told in dramatic fashion through videos that document and reenact their story. One such story was of a couple who gave beyond their "wildest dreams." The husband looked at the odometer of his car one day and felt God speaking to him to give the same amount to the campaign. God "miraculously" provided the money after the commitment was made and

the couple knew for sure that “this was God.” Another story was of a couple who gave a large amount and received a bonus of the exact same amount. A different video gave a similar story. The woman said that “the Holy Spirit convicted me to write down \$10,000 [to give].” She soon received an unexpected check for exactly \$10,000. It was “like God saying, ‘Bam, I love you.’” At times, financial praise reports are simply read by the pastor before the offering. One person started giving a tithe, made a pledge to the campaign, and unexpectedly received an \$800 check and a \$1,100 a month pay raise. Another person started tithing and soon received a 20 percent salary increase. One person started giving to the campaign and had his biggest month in sales yet, and his wife received an unexpected bonus. Lindell responds to many of these testimonies with sayings such as the following: “When we get behind God, He gets behind us”; “We don’t have to be afraid to give”; “When you put God first, He takes care of you”; “When you step out in obedience, the blessing of the Lord comes upon you.”

Religious Relief and Empowerment. Porterfield says that the healing messages and practices of Christianity have made it “a persistently vital” religion. One reason, she says, is the relief that these messages provide. “Hope is relief. Faith is a form of hope.”¹⁷⁰ Additionally, Wuthnow says that “groups in which stories are told are often associated with empowerment.” Thus, people are given not only relief from their circumstance through hearing stories, but also the possibility that they—through the help of God—can overcome their own personal challenges, whether physical or financial. This line of thinking is clearly shown in the moment right after the praise reports are read on Sunday morning. Before the pastor leads the congregation into a time of brief prayer, he exhorts them to apply the testimony they have just heard. Consider the following statements

¹⁷⁰ Porterfield, “Healing in the History of Christianity,” 229.

made by members of the pastoral staff after the reports are given: “Don’t carry your troubles close to your chest, give them to Jesus”; “There’s nothing too difficult for God”; “How many believe God answers prayer? [cheers from the congregation]. I hope that builds your faith this morning”; “The evidence is here [holds up the cards]; “Whatever you need . . . we’re gonna believe God for a miracle”; “God can do something about your situation today”; “Lift your hands and lift your voice. Call on God . . . ask Him to do something miraculous.”

The members I interviewed confirm the themes I have discussed. When I asked if they ever go forward for prayer or if they ever fill out request cards (and if so, for what), I did not receive a single answer that was not related to healing or finances. Melissa said she went forward for an employment situation, for her daughter’s healing, and before a surgery. She also filled out request cards for jobs and surgery. Katie says, “We filled out more prayer request cards about finding jobs than I think we’re probably allowed to . . . The kinds of prayer request cards that we’ve filled out have been, ‘Lord, we need a job. We have no money in our current situation. Help us find a job to remedy that.’” When asked if there was anything else they fill out cards for, she said—without any suggestions from me—that they have been blessed to not have health problems, so not really. When I asked David Lindell what things he is currently praying for, one of his answers was “right now I’m praying that the Lord would help our house to sell.”

Cognitive Dissonance. It should be mentioned that sometimes people’s hopes and expectations are not met, occasionally causing a member to experience cognitive dissonance. Nick, who came to JRA having never tithed, said that a “powerful” sermon by Lindell caused him to begin doing so and he has “been a total convert since then.”

Still, there was a hint that perhaps he was disappointed in the results: “You hear stories of like ‘I started tithing and I got a raise at my work’ or ‘I started tithing and I got \$40,000 that I wasn’t expecting.’ And you always want to hear that that could happen to you. You always want to hope that something like that could happen to you. But, you know, it’s never really happened to me.” Nick would, however, go on to say that God has always blessed him with what he needs, and he does “believe that there’s a blessing in tithing, and if anything, you’re [at least] helping the church.”

Similar stories could be told with regard to healing. The pastoral staff seems attuned to these possibilities and attempts to maintain motivation (and therefore vitality) in several ways. In a sermon on prayer, Lindell taught on frequency, fervency, and faithfulness. He told the congregation that “there are some things God won’t do . . . until you pray it through until completion . . . because if you ever stop, you’re finished.”

“Answered prayer is a matter of frequency” and one must pray until there is a “breakthrough.” People must “harangue heaven,” “really get a hold of God,” “cry out” to Him, “beat the doors of heaven,” and “raise the roof” when they pray.¹⁷¹ If “you say, ‘God didn’t come through for me,’ [ask yourself] did you cry out to Him day and night?” He then asked, “How bad do you want it? How desperate are you?” Through these types of messages, the pastoral staff attempts to maintain hope as well as motivation.

Optimism

By means of worship, prayer, and storytelling, people at JRA believe they encounter the supernatural and therefore perceive JRA to be a place where exciting things

¹⁷¹ To people in the church who might be uncomfortable with this way of praying, Lindell had this to say: “Quit being so loyal to a church background or [saying] ‘I’m reserved.’ How about instead of ‘I’m reserved,’ ‘I’m immature in my faith.’ How about instead of ‘I’m not comfortable doing that,’ ‘I’ve not surrendered that area of my life to Christ and His Word. We gotta say it is what it is.’”

are happening. However, it is not only (perceived) supernatural elements that make JRA exciting. JRA also uses “natural” ways to promote itself as exciting. The main way JRA does this is by promoting a positive (and exciting) outlook on the Christian life, change, and the future.

A Better Way. Christian Smith offers the following assessment of evangelicals:

Evangelicals believe that their practical way of life, their morality, their functional standards—which are seen as deriving directly from the ultimate Truth they understand—simply “work” better than anybody else’s. On this point, evangelicals are pragmatists. They believe God has created reality in a certain way and that those whose moral practices violate that reality will unavoidably suffer frustration, malfunction, and, ultimately, spiritual death.¹⁷²

At the foundation of Smith’s argument is that evangelical Christians believe that their way of life ultimately leads to a richer, fuller life. This approach by churches is often referred to, at times pejoratively, as the “therapeutic” benefits of the gospel.¹⁷³ Sargeant says that to some seeker churches, “the principal evidence of Christianity’s veracity is its utility—its many benefits.”¹⁷⁴ This perspective has been shown with regard to financial blessing, as when Lindell said he would tithe even if he were not a Christian because of the benefits that come from it. David Lindell said that he shares his faith primarily “because I feel like Jesus is life to the fullest, so in Christ people find life abundantly.” He said that those who are not Christians are “missing out.” Sargeant calls this “the soft sell” of the Christian message used by seeker churches in which personal fulfillment and

¹⁷² Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, 129.

¹⁷³ This especially seems to be the case with Sargeant, who believes seeker churches have adopted the “therapeutic mentality in modern America” (*Seeker Churches*, 98-103). For a less critical assessment, see Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, 21, 151-53.

¹⁷⁴ Sargeant, *Seeker Churches*, 100.

“the satisfactions and psychological fulfillment that Christian faith offers” is stressed.¹⁷⁵

“The promise of this-worldly peace and fulfillment supplements, perhaps even supersedes, the eternal consequence of one’s personal response to Christ.”¹⁷⁶

The emphasis on “this-worldly peace and fulfillment” and Christianity’s “better” life is certainly evident at JRA. This perspective is an important factor in JRA’s vitality because, as Donald Miller says, if a church “is not addressing deeply felt needs it will not sustain the commitment of potential members.”¹⁷⁷ In many ways, JRA promotes living a better, healthier, more positive life. In a Sunday message titled “Soul Control,” Lindell used Psalm 34 to teach people how to control their emotions and feelings and how to “win the battle” on the inside to live a victorious Christian life. His first example was to control what one says. To make his point, he brought a volunteer on stage and had him put his arms up parallel to his shoulders. He then said six negative statements like “you’re worthless” to the man and then pressed down on his arms. The arms came straight down. The volunteer then put his arms back up, and Lindell said six positive statements like “you’re awesome” and then pressed down on his arms. The arms easily resisted Lindell’s pressure. Lindell’s point was that what someone says, whether to him/herself or others, influences one’s physical and emotional well-being.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁵ Sargeant, *Seeker Churches*, 13.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 99.

¹⁷⁷ Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, 184.

¹⁷⁸ This example and several others discussed in this chapter could be perceived as promoting the doctrine of “positive confession” or what is commonly known as the “health and wealth” prosperity gospel. Positive confession, defined by the A/G as “acknowledging or owning desirable situations,” is clearly condemned by the A/G (Assemblies of God USA, “The Believer and Positive Confession,” http://ag.org/top/Beliefs/Position_Papers/pp_downloads/pp_4183_confession.pdf [accessed October 26, 2008]). However, a careful reading of the A/G position does not show much correlation between JRA and the positive confession movement, though JRA may occasionally come dangerously close to the line.

After stressing the need for speaking positive words, Lindell emphasized the role of positive feelings. He told the congregation not to live by their feelings, but instead by their convictions. He told them to “preach to yourself” and “exhort yourself” and replace your negative feelings with something else. Five months later, in a Wednesday night teaching called “Holidays and the Adrenaline Rush,” Lindell referenced the “Soul Control” sermon in discussing how to learn to control one’s emotions during the holiday adrenaline rush. He told people to stop saying “I’m tired” all the time or they truly will be tired. “Get a hold of yourself,” he told them, “Stop it!” The example for the message on how to deal with the effects of adrenaline was Elijah’s “over-the-top adrenaline rush” and his eventual “crash and burn” (1 Kings 17-18).

Sargeant also says that seeker churches tend to portray a God who “loves you, is proud of you, believes in you, and will give you strength.”¹⁷⁹ There are many examples of this portrayal of God at JRA. One good example is the James River Women’s ministry, led by Debbie Lindell. Their brochure for “JRA Women Friday Nights” says, “It is our prayer that you will come and experience the inviting atmosphere and be reminded of how loved and cherished you are.” Debbie Lindell started the annual national Designed for Life Women’s Conference because, as the 2007 brochure says, she felt God say to her, “Reveal to [women] how precious and valuable they are to Me. Let them know that they are magnificently designed for a purpose—so that they will step forward, overflowing with confidence and strength, to be all they were created to be.” The 2008 conference brochure contains this message from Debbie: “Do you realize God is thinking about you today and smiling! He not only believes in you, He loves and cherishes everything about you.”

¹⁷⁹ Sargeant, *Seeker Churches*, 86.

As hinted in the examples above, JRA also promotes that adhering to Christian teachings leads to a physically healthier life.¹⁸⁰ In another Wednesday night teaching, “Six Principles of Forgiveness,” Lindell mentioned that the stress related to unforgiveness can cause heart disease.¹⁸¹ Sargeant says that even seeker churches that do emphasize “the hard sell” of sin and its consequences often do so “in terms of how sin harms the individual, rather than how it is offensive to a holy God.”¹⁸² In “The Value of Doing Life Together,” a Sunday sermon aimed at persuading people to join a life group (a.k.a. small group), Lindell listed one of his three reasons as “protection from the destructiveness of loneliness.” Using a University of Chicago study and the American Institute of Stress, he commented that loneliness can cause hypertension and lead to other illness. Somewhat ironically, a sermon promoting the value of being together in a “body of Christ” gave three individualistic reasons for doing so: personal development, protection from loneliness, and personal productivity. The point was mainly what a life group can do for *you*, not what you may give or contribute to a group. Overall, all the

¹⁸⁰ Members of JRA often notice, as David Lindell does, that “most of the pastors on staff are in good shape . . . because we do place some sort of emphasis upon the fact that you should take care of yourself; your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit.” The website promotes “The River” fitness center by explaining that Jesus “grew in wisdom and in stature” (Luke 2:40). In a training session for life group leaders, one of the “ten questions to help us evaluate and grow in our spiritual passion” was “Is poor health or fatigue a factor?” The pastor leading the session said health and fitness is something “a lot of times the American church doesn’t talk about.” The training manual for the leaders contained a quote from Vince Lombardi: “Fatigue makes cowards of us all.” Moreover, in a January 2008 staff chapel, Lindell gave a message to the staff about diet and exercise.

¹⁸¹ Amanda Porterfield’s work on healing is worth noting here: “Recent studies also show that people who hold religious beliefs and engage in religious worship tend to have faster and better recovery rates and to be less likely to fall ill than those who do not. The generally accepted explanation for this is that religious belief and practice can relieve stress, which in turn affects mood, digestion, blood pressure, cholesterol, the immune system, and heart function. Belief in a higher power can increase the body’s ability to handle stress by stimulating confidence that life’s problems will ultimately be resolved. Similarly, acts of worship can help people cope with the effects of stress by offering occasions for relief from fear and frustration” (“Healing in the History of Christianity,” 229-30).

¹⁸² Sargeant, *Seeker Churches*, 95.

above examples illustrate the optimistic outlook on the Christian life. In short, JRA says that the Christian life is more beneficial than the other alternatives and helps one to live a better life.

The Excitement of Change. People hate change. But churches cannot grow without change. What is a growing church to do? JRA's solution is to use strong rhetoric to promote the exciting nature of change. By doing this, change no longer is dreaded or resisted, but is perceived as something exciting to participate in. Miller says that "the story of American religion is one of change."¹⁸³ Thumma says that for most megachurches, "adaptation to a changing context is what facilitates their success."¹⁸⁴ The flood of new membership for a growing church can become a "logistical nightmare" and the organizational structure must be changed, often through "trial and error, with the constant tension between having a dynamic spiritual product contained in a rational, bureaucratic form."¹⁸⁵ Smith says that "religions are always in motion, ever reconfiguring their identities and messages vis-à-vis their social environments."¹⁸⁶ As David Roozen says, "Change is costly, conflict is one of the significant costs, and the ability to deal with controversy is one of the essential capabilities of adaptive congregations."¹⁸⁷

¹⁸³ Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, 2.

¹⁸⁴ Thumma, "The Kingdom, The Power, and The Glory," 16.

¹⁸⁵ Thumma, "The Kingdom, The Power, and The Glory," 226.

¹⁸⁶ Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, 100.

¹⁸⁷ David A. Roozen, "Three Sources of American Religious Renewal," Faith Communities Today, http://fact.hartsem.edu/research/fact2000/topical_article1.htm (accessed August 26, 2008).

Sargeant believes that congregations must frequently “aggressively recast themselves” in order to continue to attract people.¹⁸⁸ JRA came to this point in 2003. The church was beginning to attract older people (described by Lindell as “people in their fifties”), and Lindell thought to himself, “This is not what God called us to do. This is not what God called us to be. And while the church has got more money than it’s ever had, this just isn’t good.” After talking with some church growth experts, Lindell decided that JRA was going to “redo how we do church.” He began sharing the plan publicly at the beginning of 2004. Lindell said that there were about ten different things that the church made “strategic changes on that were massive changes in that short period of time to do that. And that was grueling. That was very difficult.” From the beginning of 2004 to the present, the church has been through a massive evolution. Some of the most dramatic changes were to casual attire, to a different service structure, to more contemporary music, to Life Groups from Sunday school (what JRA called Bible Fellowship), and eventually to three services from two.

The changing of attire may have been one of the most notable changes to members. Choir robes were replaced with jeans and the choir member’s choice of certain colored shirts. Suits and ties on stage gave way to jeans and t-shirts. Lindell’s transformation may have been the most noticeable change. As Thumma noticed in his study of the time of growth at Earl Paulk’s Atlanta megachurch, “Paulk’s identity, too, had to be reworked.”¹⁸⁹ Lindell went from dark curly hair and a suit and tie to a shaved head, designer jeans, and button-down or short-sleeve shirts with the top two or three buttons undone. The background behind Lindell on stage also dramatically changed. The

¹⁸⁸ Sargeant, *Seeker Churches*, 9.

¹⁸⁹ Thumma, “The Kingdom, The Power, and The Glory,” 227.

high-church-looking pillars, bright colors, and large stained-glass window were gone, replaced with an all-black background of curtains and large sound panels.

The music also dramatically changed. Gone were classic worship songs, hymns, and people's favorite praise songs. Instead, the songs of Hillsong, a contemporary and "edgy" worship music empire from Australia, took over the church. Hillsong's dominance of the worship at JRA is a frequent point of joking—and controversy—among members. Katie said that JRA attendees are "like Hillsong groupies" and "James River's pretty much all Hillsongs." Members often divide the history of JRA into pre- and post-Hillsong invasion.¹⁹⁰ While the story of the Hillsong transformation is interesting, the main concern here is change. JRA rarely, if ever, sings a song that is more than two years old. Almost everyone I interviewed mentioned that they never learn the songs because by the time they do, the church has moved on to a new song.¹⁹¹ In fact, several times when I asked members what their favorite songs at JRA were, they said they would know them if they heard them, but they could not remember any of the words. One of the reasons I use very few song lyrics in my analyses throughout this work is that very few of the songs are around long enough to become significant to the congregation. Any songs I have observed over the last two years are probably no longer sung at JRA at the time of writing.

¹⁹⁰ Hillsong has also influenced JRA in other ways. One of Lindell's sons, Brandon, spent a year in Australia at Hillsong's headquarters learning at their various training schools. Moreover, JRA rarely has guest speakers or visiting musical performers, but when they do, they are often from Hillsong. Hillsong also is known for intense optimism and as being promoters of change in the body of Christ. As one guest speaker from Hillsong said, the church cannot be tied to tradition and living off "yesterday's manna."

¹⁹¹ According to Nick, who used to work in the creative services department at JRA, the church has some sort of contract with Hillsong so that when they come out with new music, the church immediately gets the rights to the music and will often sing it before it is even officially released to the public.

Despite some controversy, Nick was right when he commented that the worship “certainly hasn’t been turning people away.” In fact, it is likely drawing more people. Roozen, basing his conclusions on the FACT study, says that a contemporary style of worship “is positively related to membership growth. . . . The FACT data show that contemporary worship is more strongly associated with membership growth than what Dean Kelley called ‘strictness,’ the outward focus of mission-minded congregations, or even shifts in population.”¹⁹² Thus, this study cannot overemphasize the contribution current contemporary music has made to the vitality of JRA, especially in attracting a younger crowd. As a pastor from a California church said in a *New York Times* story, as a church “you don’t decide who you’re going to reach and then pick a music style. You pick a music style, and that determines who’s going to come.”¹⁹³

The overwhelming evidence at JRA is that all the changes—most of which I will not take the time to detail—have worked. When the changes began at the beginning of 2004, JRA averaged about 5,000 people. Currently it averages well over 8,000. Lindell says that, due to the changes, the church also lost about 1,500 people, which “makes the numbers even more amazing.” Lindell describes the time of intense change as “gut-wrenching” and “heart-breaking.” He said he lost many friends, and “people said some very, very hard things to hear.” At times he thought, “What have we done? Because, you know, you can’t go back. You can’t say, ‘Time out, we’re putting the robes back on, we’re putting the suits back on, and we’re going to tone this thing down.’” However, Lindell also said it was an extremely exciting time. As he reflected, he said, “It’s been the

¹⁹² Roozen, “Three Sources of American Religious Renewal.”

¹⁹³ Ben Ratliff, “Plugging In to Make a Joyful Noise Unto the Lord,” *New York Times*, November 7, 2007.

right call. It's been good for the church. My view of it is, I'm going to do whatever I feel God is asking us to do because the bottom line is it's His church."

Although many people left, even more stayed and even more began coming. Therefore, the church has continued to have to change. So how has JRA kept people on board with the church? By painting change as an exciting and necessary part of being involved in a vital church. As a "Changing History" campaign letter mailed to the congregation said, "Change has always been a big part of James River Assembly." When he introduced the concept of Life Groups, Lindell told the congregation, "We don't want to go back, we always want to go forward. To live is to change . . . The only place there's no change is the cemetery." A rare guest speaker, and even rarer, a female speaker, was brought in to speak on change to the church. She spoke about the challenge of changing and staying relevant, why the church must keep changing, and how "anything of significance is always an inconvenience." At the end of the message, Lindell came on stage and talked about change and all the great things happening at JRA and all the lives being changed, all because "we are willing to change." At the end of the service, the worship leader led the congregation in a song as a "celebration of change." In a building campaign sermon, Lindell commented that "many churches are so married to the past they miss out on the future. . . . We're about reaching the next generation." He mentioned the importance of "dressing at a consistency to where society is at." Lindell said at a different time that if you do not like change, "this place will frustrate the living daylights out of you."

This attitude of change has trickled down to members of the congregation. Ken said that "we're a church that changes all the time." Nick offered this commentary:

I just really enjoy the fact that the church is about reaching people and is about relationships. And the openness and the humbleness that the staff has that “you know, maybe we’re not doing something right, maybe we can do it better.” To be open like that, to change constantly, you know sometimes it may hurt people, sometimes people might think, “No, this is changing way too much and way too fast.” But we’ve gotta get out of our comfort zones and see the bigger picture. And I think that that’s where some churches fall behind and that’s where some churches are hurt because when you’re totally open to—and willing—for the Lord to do anything in your church, that just opens it up to grow, and, you know, that’s what the church is about and that’s what the people notice.

Kevin offered similar thoughts when asked why the church has grown:

Not being afraid to take a risk, not being afraid to do something that they’ve never done before. You know, I mean, there’s change all the time at this church. It’s just a part of it, and I love it! I think it’s cool that they’re willing to do something outside the box just to reach this certain group of people or to minister to this area of need that they see in the community. I think that that is just awesome, and I think Christianity in general needs to take a good hard look at that and to learn that we need to be more relevant in the society in which we live.

Evidently, the rhetoric of change has caught on for many members. In fact, according to Nick and Kevin, churches that are not changing are stuck in their comfort zones, falling behind, not open to the Lord, not relevant, and could learn a lot from JRA. In contrast, being a part of a constantly changing church is enjoyable, cool, and awesome. Thus, the excitement of change produces loyal, committed members and attracts new people. So far, I have looked at two ways JRA displays optimism: the excitement of change and how JRA teaches people to talk, think, and act in a positive manner. As I will now discuss, the JRA leadership practice what they preach.

The Best is Yet to Come! “The best is yet to come!” is perhaps the most recognizable expression at JRA. It is all over print material, it is mentioned almost weekly in services, and Lindell and other pastors frequently end letters or emails to the church with “The best is yet to come!” Not surprisingly, the expression comes from the Hillsong ministry. Lindell read it in one of their print materials and latched onto it.

Lindell often tells the congregation that it is “not just for the church, but for you.” The April 2007 newsletter for the Changing History campaign said, “‘The Best is Yet to Come!’ is more than a catchy phrase; it is what we have experienced year after year at James River.” This optimism about the future and about JRA in general spills over into every aspect of the church. It is something that Lindell and the church are intentional about. On his blog, Lindell lists *Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life* as one of the books he has read recently.¹⁹⁴ The author, Martin E. P. Seligman, is described as “the father of the new science of positive psychology.”¹⁹⁵

The U.S. Congregations Study concluded that one of the five things growing churches do is “commit to a positive future.”¹⁹⁶ The FACT study found that “vital, purposeful congregations have a more positive assessment about their future” and “the confidence of congregations in their future is closely tied to their ability to attract and mobilize the energies of their youth.”¹⁹⁷ JRA is certainly confident about its future. A “Vision Sunday” 2008 video said that “in 2007 God did amazing things” and there are “amazing things coming in 2008.” After the video, Lindell told the congregation, “The best days of your life are yet to come” and “the greatest days are yet ahead.” After singing a song which contains the chorus “Greater things have yet to come/ greater things

¹⁹⁴ John Lindell, “My blogs,” <http://www.johnlindell.net/>.

¹⁹⁵ Amazon, “Product Description,” http://www.amazon.com/Learned-Optimism-Change-YourMind/dp/1400078393/ref=pd_bbs_sr_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1209487626&sr=8-1 (accessed October 3, 2008). One of the editorial reviews says, “Dr. Seligman makes an optimistic case for optimism: you can learn it, you can measure it, you can teach it, and you will be healthier and happier for it.”

¹⁹⁶ U.S. Congregations, “What Growing Churches Do,” <http://www.uscongregations.org/what-growing-churches-do.htm> (accessed September 18, 2008). Another page on the website lists ten areas strong churches excel in, one of which is “looking to the future” (“Of General Interest,” www.uscongregations.org/pub-ofgeneralinterest.htm [accessed September 18, 2008]).

¹⁹⁷ Faith Communities Today, “Clarity of Purpose and Vitality,” http://fact.hartsem.edu/research/fact2000/Topicalfindings_purpose.htm (accessed August 26, 2008).

are still to be done in this city,” Lindell came on stage and asked, “How many know greater things have yet to come and greater things are still to be done?” On March 16, 2008, the first Sunday having three services, Lindell exclaimed that the church is “making room for all God is going to do in the future.” He then asked, “How many believe the best is yet to come?” Lindell often reviews all the “incredible” things God is doing in the church and then asks, “If the best is yet to come, what must He have for us?” The January 2008 Changing History newsletter started, “As 2008 get underway, it’s exciting to think ‘The Best is Yet to Come!’”

This optimism is used not only for the more distant future but also for the immediate future. The way church services are advertised during the weekly video announcements is very revealing. People are encouraged to come back to “tonight’s dynamic service.” Then they are encouraged to come back Wednesday for “your Wednesday night boost . . . It’s the mid-week boost you’ve been waiting for.” Finally, next weekend is going to be “an unforgettable weekend” with “powerful preaching.” Next weekend “is going to be awesome,” “amazing,” and “blow-your-mind awesome.” Speaking of the Christmas outreach that was approaching, Lindell told the congregation, “They’ve got a program that will knock your socks off.” The JRA Women’s conference brochure advertises “A Fabulous Opening Night!!! Two AMAZING DAYS . . . BREATHTAKING Finale!”

People are constantly reminded of how amazing the things happening at the church are. The first words of the July Changing History newsletter were, “Awesome, unbelievable, incredible. Those are the kinds of words that flood our mind as we try to

describe what God is doing at James River.” Here are the first two paragraphs written by Lindell in the April 2008 newsletter:

The things we are seeing God do at James River continues to be more than we ever imagined. As we look back over the month of July, we are reminded of what Paul says in Ephesians 3:20, “God can do anything, you know—far more than you could ever imagine or guess or request in your wildest dreams!” (THE MESSAGE)¹⁹⁸

It seems every area of the ministry is experiencing the blessing of God in an over-the-top, dynamic, far more than you could ever imagine way! We are truly seeing History Changed in the lives of people.

In case these excerpts are not convincing enough, consider the following example.

During his “Reasons Why I Give” sermon, Lindell listed reason four as “I love the vision of James River Assembly.” He then went on what seemed like a spontaneous ode to JRA:

I’m crazy about what God’s doing here. I mean, when I see what’s happening here, when I look at the people God is raising up, the world changers He is bringing up and the way God is working in their life, I am absolutely crazy about it. I mean, it’s just so amazing to watch what God is doing. I mean, you look at it, you look at our worship today, being led by somebody who came up through the ranks. I mean, you watch and you see it happening, our 9.12 ministry led by someone who came up through the ranks. I mean, you watch this, it’s unbelievable, it’s amazing to watch it, how God is raising up people. I look across town at North Point church [a JRA church plant] and everybody on their staff came through James River [raises arms in air; is getting very excited], and their doing a fabulous job. And I celebrate that. And that’s just a few of the places. You’re investing in people that are going to change this world for Jesus Christ. It’s exciting. I watch up there in the, you know, the fourth and fifth grade area and see what’s happening there. I think of the story of Debbie walking up the stairs in the atrium: two little guys walking up there carrying their guitars that are bigger than they are, and they’re, they’re trying to tote ‘em up the stairs and Debbie said “Oh, you got a guitar lesson?” “Yeah.” She said, “You gonna play guitar so some day you can lead worship in church?” “That’s the plan.” I love it! That’s what it’s about! We’re raising up a group of people that are going to change this world for Christ and are going to resource the Kingdom of God. It’s not just about James River; it’s about being able to send people around the world. I’m telling you it, you watch, you’re going to see it more and more and more. It’s

¹⁹⁸ Though the English Standard Version (ESV) is the “official” translation of the church, JRA has been using The Message translation more and more over the last two years. This is not surprising, as it is known for its “exciting” way of translating and for hyperbole. The irony is that a church that takes a literal reading of the Bible so seriously would use such a loose translation.

so exciting. I love what's happening. I love being able to help a church like Deliverance Temple like we helped them there. I love being able to do what we did down in Cuba and in the Sudan and over in India. I love what we're getting to do; it is so amazing to be able to see the gospel advance. I'm crazy about what God's doing here. It's amazing. [His speech slows down here.] We believe in the vision here. I mean, if you wanted to plant your money, invest in a place that's giving you a great return on your investment—I'm not saying we're the best there ever was—I'm just saying this is a really good place, this is an exciting place, and so it's a joy to do it. When I walk through that fourth and fifth grade area . . . I'm telling you this is what I thought: I was glad for every person who gave and that Debbie and I were able to be a part of it. I just walked through there and touched things, looked at things, and I said, "We were a part of this!" I'm telling you, someday you'll tell your grandkids about this. You will. And you'll be glad you invested because when you get to heaven you'll see the full return on your investment.

This attitude seems somewhat contagious. Here is what Ken had to say about JRA:

I love the music, I love the preaching, I love the people, I love the Holy Spirit being there, I love the atmosphere, I love the atrium, I love the cookies, I love the muffins. I work out at The River because it's at the church. There's probably not a person in James River Assembly that loves that church more than I do. God changed me there, He grew me there . . . That's my church and I'm going to be there every time it's open . . . I just need the church, I love that church, I love the people. I don't have a bride so that church is my bride. I'm just a dyed-in-the-wool James River Assembly guy.

I asked Lindell why he was drawn to the expression "The best is yet to come!"

His answer wonderfully summarizes the three elements of optimism I have discussed at

JRA: the benefits of Christian thinking, change, and optimism about the future.

I think it's biblical. I think it's true. . . . I've watched people in life, and people who approach life pessimistically I think 80 percent of the time will make the wrong decision. People who approach life from the standpoint of "We have a good God and He's gonna do good things and God can help us"—I think optimism and faith are very closely related. They're not necessarily synonymous, but they're very closely related—I think people that approach life that way probably 80 percent of the time make the better decision. The enthusiasm that God has something good, that God is going to do something good, that "the best is yet to come." Wherever we're at, I don't want the church to ever get the idea the best has been. And I don't ever want us backward looking in our approach to ministry to ever think we've perfected it, or that we've got it right where it needs to be or that we can't make it better. I mean, one of the things that's been huge for James River is the culture of improvement. Not a culture of excellence, a

culture of improvement: how can we do it better? And that fits with “the best is yet to come.”

This chapter has argued that people come to JRA and remain committed members because JRA is perceived as an exciting place to be. At JRA, people have the opportunity to encounter the supernatural in worship and especially in the areas of healing and financial provision. In addition to the excitement that religious experience produces, JRA also is intentional about maintaining optimism throughout the congregation. Attendees are told that Christianity offers personal satisfaction and fulfillment, that change is exciting and necessary, and that the best is yet to come. Conversely, the next chapter shows a different side of JRA. Christianity is more than this-worldly fulfillment and, in many respects, the worst is yet to come.

CHAPTER THREE

“READY OR NOT, HERE HE COMES”:

THE APOCALYPTIC WORLDVIEW OF JRA

Frankly, there's no sign that needs to be fulfilled before Jesus comes. We don't need a temple in Jerusalem, we don't need anything. He could come at any moment in terms of the Rapture. The question is “Are you ready?” I got to be honest with you, a lot of people and a lot of churches don't talk much about this, and a lot of people have decided, “you know what, we don't know for sure whether the Scripture is clear on this, so we're just not going to teach it.” And that's crazy because the Bible is very, very clear that this should be taught, must be taught.

This comment by John Lindell, from the sermon “Ready or Not, Here He Comes” (Luke 21:29-34a), represents one of the most important factors for understanding JRA and its vitality: an apocalyptic worldview. From the pulpit to the pew, most people at JRA believe that there is an unseen spiritual battle between evil and good, that things are going to get worse and worse in the world, that there will be a final judgment in which deeds will be revealed, and that Jesus is coming back soon. This chapter will refer to these four beliefs as dualism, pessimism, vindication, and imminence. These beliefs drastically affect the way JRA conducts its services and, as I will argue, are a primary reason JRA is experiencing vitality as a congregation.

The term *apocalypticism* is from the Greek *apocalypsis*, which means an “unveiling” or a “revealing.” In this chapter, the term *apocalypticism* or *apocalyptic* refers to a worldview that holds that sometime in the future God will establish a new (millennial) kingdom on earth.¹⁹⁹ Although there are many characteristics of apocalyptic

¹⁹⁹ Although this definition is fairly standard in scholarship, I am influenced by Bart Ehrman's definition in his widely used textbook *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (4th ed. [New York: Oxford University, 2008], 250-51). Although Ehrman's discussion of apocalypticism is based on Jewish apocalypticists from the first century and before, these tenets have remained influential in Christian apocalypticism.

beliefs, these four main tenets are widely accepted to be the core of apocalypticism: dualism, pessimism, vindication, and imminence.²⁰⁰ Each tenet relies on the other tenets, and all of them build on each other; however, all of them hinge on one very important idea, namely, that Jesus is coming back (and soon).

The belief that Jesus is coming back soon to “rapture” his church is certainly not unique to JRA. The modern belief in a Rapture has its roots in premillennialism. In his book *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture*, Paul Boyer argues that millennial ideas have influenced American Protestantism since its beginning. However, Boyer says it is specifically premillennialism (as opposed to postmillennialism or amillennialism)²⁰¹ that has most dramatically influenced conservative Protestantism. Boyer traces “the resurgence and reorientation of premillennialism,” which included a strong belief in the Rapture, back to British theologian John Nelson Darby (1800-1882).²⁰² Premillennial ideas—including the Rapture, the rise of the Antichrist, the seven years of Tribulation, the Battle of Armageddon, and the thousand-year millennial reign of Jesus—found their way into mainstream conservative American Protestantism through Cyrus Scofield’s influential *Scofield Reference Bible* (1909). Scofield’s Bible, which reflected a “premillennialist

²⁰⁰ For example, Ehrman’s textbook lists these four tenets (*The New Testament*, 252-3). My brief introduction of each of the four tenets in this chapter draws from Ehrman’s basic descriptions.

²⁰¹ Postmillennialism is the belief that the millennial kingdom started with Jesus’ resurrection and will end with his Second Coming. Therefore, there will be no future kingdom of God on earth. This view was or is held primarily by liberal Protestant mainline denominations. Amillennialism is the view that there will be no future reign of Christ on earth. Some spiritualize the Millennium and make it represent Christ’s present reign in Heaven during the entire Church age. For a discussion of the decline of postmillennialism and the rise of premillennialism in evangelicalism, see Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, 1-9.

²⁰² Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1992), 87. Boyer gives a great history of the belief in the idea of Millennium and its influence on American culture and society.

consensus,”²⁰³ eventually led to more popular works such as Hal Lindsey’s *The Late Great Planet Earth* and more recently the *Left Behind* novels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins.

As a result, premillennialism has “played an important role in shaping public attitudes on a wide range of topics,”²⁰⁴ and JRA is no exception. James River’s (and the A/G’s) end-time beliefs are more specifically dispensational premillennialism, the belief that the current dispensation will end soon and will be followed by “the rapture of the saints.”²⁰⁵ After this Rapture, a seven-year Great Tribulation will follow and will conclude with “the visible return of Christ with His saints to reign on the earth for one thousand years.”²⁰⁶ During my months of observation, the preaching team did a seven-part series titled “Signs of Christ’s Return: End Times According to the Gospel of Luke.” In addition, nearly a dozen sermons focused on end time events during my period of observation. Several years ago, Lindell and the preaching team did a twelve-part series out of Matthew titled “Signs of the Second Coming.”²⁰⁷ Furthermore, during the Advent season of 2006, Lindell explained that until the Middle Ages, Advent had to do with the Second Coming of Christ, not his birth. Therefore, Advent at JRA that year (which, as far as I know, is the only year Advent was observed) was full of messages about the return of Jesus. JRA also emphasizes eschatology in its “Discovery Class” for new believers at

²⁰³ Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*, 98.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., ix.

²⁰⁵ Assemblies of God USA, “Statement of Fundamental Truths,” http://ag.org/top/Beliefs/Statement_of_Fundamental_Truths/sft.pdf [accessed October 26, 2008].

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ This is not to be confused with several sermons titled “Signs of the Second Coming” that are from the Luke series.

JRA, which spans several months; two full sessions are dedicated to “The End Times.” Before discussing the prevalence of these apocalyptic ideas in the congregation, I will explain how apocalypticism relates to the conversation on vitality.

Apocalypticism and Vitality

Otherworldliness and Strictness Theory. Apocalyptic elements contribute to the vitality of JRA in several ways. While Finke and Stark use market theory to explain some of church vitality in America, they insist that “the use of economic tools in no way suggests that the content of religion is unimportant.”²⁰⁸ On the contrary, they argue that “churches committed to vivid otherworldliness” appeal to religious people and grow at a faster rate than those that do not.²⁰⁹ “Intense otherworldliness,” they argue, “is needed to motivate the religious.”²¹⁰ The importance of otherworldliness should be considered throughout the discussion of apocalypticism at JRA. Moreover, influenced by strictness theory, Finke and Stark claim that religious organizations can thrive only to the extent that they have a theology that provides “high demands and distinctive boundaries,”²¹¹ can “motivate sacrifice,”²¹² and offers “promises for the life hereafter.”²¹³ This form of strictness theory will be especially valuable in understanding the emphasis on vindication at JRA.

²⁰⁸ Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America*, 9.

²⁰⁹ Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America*, 1.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 263.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 249. See also the FACT study, which says that congregations that place less emphasis on morality and standards are more likely to have declining membership (Faith Communities Today, “High Moral and Community Standards,” http://fact.hartsem.edu/research/fact2000/topicalfindings_moral.htm (accessed August 26, 2008)).

²¹² Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America*, 8.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 275.

Subcultural Identity Theory. In his book *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving*, Christian Smith offers a subcultural identity theory of religious strength. His theory argues that American evangelicalism is strong “because it is—or at least perceives itself to be—embattled with forces that seem to oppose or threaten it.”²¹⁴ Indeed, evangelicalism “*thrives* on distinction, engagement, tension, conflict, and threat.”²¹⁵ The apocalyptic belief of a new kingdom on earth has at its core the belief in the Second Coming of Jesus to set up his kingdom on earth.²¹⁶ The tenets of dualism, pessimism, vindication, and imminence all point to and find their purpose in this culmination. At JRA, this belief is not passively accepted as the norm for Christian faith; rather, as Lindell said in an Advent sermon on the Second Coming, “this doctrine is under attack.”

In a sermon titled “The Coming Kingdom” (Luke 17:22-37), Lindell denounced the “unbelieving theologians” who think Jesus’ coming is only a metaphor. “We have to be shored up in our faith,” he said, because of skeptics that float around. A few weeks earlier, Lindell voiced his concern that “evangelicalism is turning away from a premillennial [understanding of the end times].” They may be turning away because people have “believed the lie of a liberal, dead church,” as Lindell said in “Until He Comes” (Luke 18:1-8). In a sermon on Luke 20:41-44, which quotes Psalm 110, Lindell attacked liberal theologians and their interpretation of Psalm 110 and emphasized that it

²¹⁴ Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, 89.

²¹⁵ Ibid., 89; emphasis his.

²¹⁶ This is to be distinguished from the Rapture, which takes place before the Second Coming in premillennialism.

is important to understand the correct application of the Psalm “as we live in the end times.” Saying Jesus is a just a great moral teacher is “nonsensical” and “illogical.”

In a sermon on the Second Coming, Lindell compared the “liberal Bible scholars” of the Jesus Seminar to the cynics and skeptics in 2 Peter 3 who doubt the return of Jesus. He told the congregation that a recent survey of Protestant ministers reported that 90 percent of them have no expectation that Christ will return. To those who have concluded that the return of Jesus is an “obscure” and “unimportant” doctrine, Lindell responded, “Jesus is coming again. The end of the story is the reason for the story . . . He is coming back again. The Word of God demands it.” This statement was met with loud shouts of “Amen” and clapping from the congregation. In another sermon on the Second Coming, Lindell complained that “the church [worldwide] has become somewhat indifferent” about the Second Coming. In yet another “Signs of the Second Coming” sermon, Lindell read Luke 21:27, “And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.” He then commented, “There’s nothing in this that would lead us to believe this is allegory. This is not fiction. This is not fantasy . . . Jesus Christ will return *literally* to this earth.”

Considering the portrait presented in chapter one of most Ozarkers who attend JRA, it is likely that most people already come to JRA holding a (dispensational) premillennial understanding of the end times (although they may not name it as such). So why take the time to defend beliefs against attacks and threats, when most in the congregation already hold these beliefs? Members’ beliefs presented in chapter one concerning the literal interpretation of the Bible certainly would not lead one to think that people are tempted to think of the return of Jesus as “fiction” or “fantasy.” Is a large

percentage of the congregation reading materials by “liberal” or “unbelieving” theologians who think of the Second Coming as a metaphor? Probably not. Nevertheless, the “sense” or “perception” of “crisis, conflict, or threat . . . serves to invigorate and mobilize evangelical vitality.”²¹⁷ In this way, apocalypticism serves to help evangelicals “see themselves as living an aberrant way of life from that of the surrounding world” and “as peculiar, as different, as strangers in their own land.”²¹⁸ This “self-consciousness about difference,” says Smith, is beneficial to evangelicals because it “creates significant distinction, engagement, and even conflict—in their own minds, at least—between themselves and outsiders,”²¹⁹ and it is precisely this (perceived) distinction and conflict that causes evangelicalism and its churches to thrive.

Dualism

Dualism is the belief that cosmic powers or forces of good and evil exist in the world, and people are either on God’s side or Satan’s. The preaching at JRA assumes that Satan is a real being and a real influence in the world. “Satan is active,” Lindell told the congregation one Sunday morning. Wacker says that “in the Pentecostal cosmos Satan and his demon functionaries proved palpably real.”²²⁰ One way dualism is preached at JRA is in the context of “spiritual warfare.”²²¹ In the sermon “Fight for Your Life” (Luke 22:31-38), Lindell preached about the “realm and arena of spiritual warfare.” After

²¹⁷ Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, 121.

²¹⁸ Ibid., 131.

²¹⁹ Ibid., 131-32.

²²⁰ Wacker, *Heaven Below*, 91.

²²¹ Grant Wacker gives several historical examples of how Pentecostals have often used “military rhetoric” to “stir the troops” (*Heaven Below*, 258).

reading 1 Peter 5:8-9, Lindell commented, “Wake up! There is a spiritual warfare. There is a spiritual battle. There is a real devil. There are real demons.” In fact, “these spiritual realities are more real than physical realities.” People are told to engage in this warfare because “there are strata of demons . . . and we are at spiritual war with them.” Furthermore, “There is a battle for your soul. Satan wants to shake you up.” Lindell went on to speak of being ready for “battle,” having the “Christian arsenal,” and “reporting for duty.” During the altar call, Christians often are told to pray for those in the congregation for whose souls a “battle” is being fought.²²²

Scotty Gibbons especially uses this imagery in his altar calls. In a Sunday morning service, he asked Christians to pray for the “battle going on right now for souls.” At a Realife service, he asked the young believers in the audience to “wage war” in prayer for those who do not know God. In another Realife service, he said that a “battle is being waged right now for people who are away from God.” The enemy, he said, was fighting unbelievers by saying, “You’re just not ready [to make a “decision for Christ”].” Gibbons replied that “the devil is a liar.”

Dualism clearly defines to whom people belong. Lindell made it clear in one sermon that there are two types of people in this world, the children of God and the children of Satan. “The Bible does not teach the universal fatherhood of God.” If someone is not a “believer,” then “your father is not God, your father is the Devil.” Lindell added, “This determines everything for you in terms of your future.” Moreover, in a Sunday evening sermon titled “A Tale of Two Rebels” (2 Samuel 20:1-16), Lindell said that “rebellion is demonic . . . there’s something satanic about it,” and when

²²² The Discovery Class for new believers has an entire session labeled “Spiritual Beings—Angels and Demons.”

someone rebels “they’re being satanically, demonically motivated.”²²³ Dualism also divides history into two ages: the present age and the age to come, when God will intervene and destroy the forces of evil. When Lindell listed five reasons Jesus is coming back, the fifth and final reason was “The destruction of Satan demands it.” “The devil is not sovereign,” the church is told, but until his destruction, “God allows him to do certain things to carry out His purpose.” These “certain things” Satan is allowed to do leads to the next main tenet of an apocalyptic worldview, pessimism.

Pessimism

Pessimism is the belief that things will get worse and worse in the world until Jesus finally comes to set up his kingdom on the earth.²²⁴ In “The Coming Kingdom,” Lindell bluntly says that people “aren’t going to get better and better; it’s going to get worse and worse.” The end time series on Luke was full of pessimism about the future. Over the course of several sermons, six “signs of the Second Coming” were discussed from Luke 21: deception, dissension, devastation, persecution, destruction (of Jerusalem), and darkness. These sermons also heavily relied on passages from the book of Revelation. For over a month, the congregation experienced messages of apocalyptic doom. All six signs exemplified a pessimistic outlook; this section will discuss three of them.

Dissension. This “sign” was not given as much attention as the other two, but set the scene for the chaos the world will experience. Lindell spoke of “wars and rumors of

²²³ The theological reason Lindell gives for this conclusion is that rebellion is what caused the fall of Satan in the first place.

²²⁴ Pessimism is implicitly a premillennial position, since postmillennials have a more optimistic outlook on the world and believe that things will (and must) get better before the Second Coming, which signifies the end of the millennial kingdom. However, there is certainly some implicit tension in pessimism. As Grant Wacker says, dispensational premillennialism had the effect of a “sense of doom just ahead . . . But another, simultaneous, effect was an exhilarating sense of hope” (Wacker, *Heaven Below*, 251).

wars” in modern times, explaining that these are only “birth pangs” of even more wars to come. Lindell showed that throughout history wars have increased since the time of Jesus. He then used Revelation to look forward to the future. From Revelation 6:1-2, Lindell told the congregation that one-fourth of the world’s population, about 1.5 billion people, will die. This death toll would mean a conflict seventy-five times the size of World War II, he said. He then flipped over to Revelation 9:13-16 and claimed that one-half of the population of the earth will be lost to war in a “very, very short period of time.”

Devastation. “Let’s get something straight,” Lindell told the congregation, “we’re living on a disintegrating planet.” He continued, “As we move closer to the coming of the Lord, just as you’re gonna see more and more wars, you’re gonna see more and more natural disasters, you’re gonna see more and more earthquakes.” Lindell began his lengthy discourse on devastation with earthquakes. He rattled off brief descriptions of sixteen different major earthquakes from 1755 to the present, naming the date, where it took place, and how many people died. “There will be earthquakes, and they will increase, and we know that because Jesus said so [“that’s right,” said a person in the audience].” He then used Revelation 16:17-20 to say that an earthquake is coming “that literally levels the topography of the earth” and might restore the earth to its pre-flood state.

A result of these earthquakes, said Lindell, may be the famines described in Revelation 6:6 and 8:7-9:

I think part of the famine conditions at the time of the end may in fact be the result of earthquakes. You say, “How does that happen?” Creation scientist Henry Morris wrote this: “It is possible that worldwide explosions would be a normal consequence of worldwide violent earthquakes. The masses of water vapor blown

skyward might well condense in the intense updraft into hailstones and showers of burning lava, which would be cast upon the earth. The blood of . . . animals might be mingled with them or possibly showers of liquid water drops might be so contaminated with dust and gasses as to appear blood red.

These “huge, huge cataclysms” will result in “food shortage of epic proportions.” Lindell then read a quote from *Newsweek* magazine from a few years ago:

“It comes screaming out the sky like a scud from Hell. Bigger than a mountain and packed with more energy than the world’s entire nuclear arsenal. It hits the atmosphere at one hundred times the velocity of a speeding bullet and less than a second later smacks into the ground with an explosive force of one hundred million megatons of TNT. The shockwaves from the crash landing, traveling at 20,000 miles an hour, level everything within 150 miles. Simultaneously, a plume of vaporized stone shoots up from the impact site, blasting a hole through the atmosphere and venting hot debris. The vaporized rock cools, condensing back into hundreds of millions of tiny stones. As they streak back to earth, they heat up, and soon the very air glows hot pink. Steam hisses from green leaves. Buildings and even trees burst into flames. Nitrogen and oxygen in the atmosphere combine into nitric acid. Any surviving life crawling out of a hole or cave gets pelted with rain as caustic as the acid in a car battery.” That’s what Henry Mellos of the University of Arizona calculates would happen if something five to six miles across fell from space and smacked into the earth. Now, this will make your day: currently there are six asteroids of that size that cross the Earth’s orbit.

Lindell then talked about this asteroid hitting the earth as if it will undoubtedly happen: “I believe, frankly, people are gonna know, with our telecommunications age, they’re gonna know the asteroid is coming their way. And when it hits, I mean instantly there’s gonna be cataclysm.” Altogether, there will be “a total change of life as we know it.” There will be “mass graves and disease that is unimaginable.” “People will be scared to death. Literally.”

A few weeks later, during his introductory remarks about darkness, Lindell reviewed the devastation that is going to come upon the earth. He quoted from a document titled “The Missouri State Hazard Mitigation Plan,” from the State Emergency Management Agency (SEMA) of Missouri:

“Lately, disasters appear to be occurring more frequently than during previous years. Federal, state, and local emergency managers need to prepare for, respond to, and recover from the increasing frequency and scope of disasters. While recent major disasters are memorable, the increased rate of occurrence is remarkable.” This is the government talking. I continue to quote: “Disasters in the 1990s were nearly twice as frequent as disasters in the 1980s. From 1993 through 2006 alone, Missouri experienced thirteen presidentially declared flood disasters, including one that exceeded the once-in-every-five-hundred-years flood levels. According to some weather forecaster, the country has entered a period of extremely destructive weather patterns.” The person who sent me this wrote this, and I quote them: “I couldn’t help but think, ‘even our state government sees and is documenting these signs of the times, yet not knowing why it is happening.’” Isn’t that amazing? The government is saying the signs are happening.

Darkness. As Lindell introduced the “sign” of darkness from Luke 21:25-28, he told the congregation, “you are now in the final moments [in the text] before He comes.” “Planetary stellar chaos” is coming, he announced to the crowd. He then quoted an unnamed scientist who speculates that if a rogue celestial body like a star or planet comes too close to the earth, it could cause the earth to tilt a few degrees on its axis:

“At that moment an earthquake would make the earth shudder. Air and water would continue to move through the inertia. Hurricanes would sweep the earth. Seas would rush over continents carrying gravel, sand, and marine animals casting them on the land. Heat would develop, rocks would melt, and volcanoes would erupt. Lava would flow from fissures in the ground covering vast land areas. Mountains would spring from the plains, traveling and climbing on the shoulders of other mountains causing rifts and faults. Lakes would be tilted and emptied. Rivers would change course, and large areas would be submerged undersea while at the same time some seas would turn into deserts, their waters flowing wildly away.” The point is this: with very little effort, God can turn this earth, this solar system, this galaxy, into an ecological hell.

The congregation is told that things like this are “all over the Bible” and that “whenever the Word of God wants to emphasize something, it does it by repeating it.” Darkness will come upon the earth by “a supernatural turning out of the lights with temperature preservation . . . There will be absolute darkness, mixed with tsunamis, hurricanes, earthquakes, asteroids, meteorites, a poisoned water supply—it’s unimaginable.” There

will be “terror after terror after terror . . . Those that cannot die will wish that they could.”

“Can you imagine the terror of darkness with a cataclysmic worldwide earthquake, with the waves out of control, hyper-hurricanes, super-volcanoes, and it’s dark, and hundred-pound hailstones?”

Not surprisingly, the congregation was mostly silent during this sermon and others like it. There were certainly no jokes and no laughing. Lindell looked agitated in his facial expressions while announcing these scenarios. Since JRA has a premillennial theology—and Lindell was clear in his sermon on darkness that “all the Christians will be gone” from the Rapture before all this takes place—people may wonder “what is the point?” or “why?” Lindell asked the same question and answered by saying that he has the same intentions as Jesus, “to warn you” about the coming judgment, or the final vindication.

Vindication

There are several aspects of vindication, but the ultimate concern for this section is the final vindication, when people must give account for what they have done. Some will be punished and others rewarded, but either way all must stand before God, both the living and the dead. As previously mentioned, Finke and Stark claim that religious organizations thrive when their theology provides high demands and boundaries and offers promises for the life hereafter. Both of these elements are at the forefront of the discussion of vindication at JRA. First, I will discuss the belief in Heaven and Hell at JRA. Then, I will describe high demands and distinctive boundaries at JRA, as well as the motivation of future rewards.

Heaven and Hell. James River believes in a literal Heaven and a literal Hell. Lindell says that “Jesus spoke more about judgment and Hell than any other subject.” Hell, like the Second Coming, is recognized by JRA as a doctrine under attack. In a sermon titled “Shocked to be in Hell” (Luke 16:19-31), Lindell lamented that “Hell’s come upon hard times” and that 99 percent of people do not think they are going to Hell when they die. In another sermon he said, “Almost everybody thinks they’re going to heaven. That kind of thinking is not in the Bible.” Almost weekly, Lindell uses statements like this one: “If you don’t submit your life to Him, then you’ll go to an eternal Hell.” He was quick to point out at the end of a different service, “That’s not my opinion, it’s the Bible.” During a message on the end times, Lindell read what he called a “startling verse, a frightening verse” for those who do not know God: “When the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might” (1 Thessalonians 1:7-9). David Lindell puts it bluntly: “People who don’t accept Christ as their savior will spend eternity in Hell.”

High Demands and Reward. Belief in Heaven and Hell does not in itself adequately explain vitality at JRA. Dean Kelley argues that vital religions do not just provide ideas, but they also must provide meaning. Religious groups provide meaning by demanding response to the ideas through such commitments as time, money, and energy. Thus, we get the following formula from Kelley: “*meaning = concept + demand.*”²²⁵ People usually are willing to comply with the demands because, as Finke and Stark

²²⁵ Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches are Growing*, 52.

argue, it is rewarding.²²⁶ Additionally, these rewards are often otherworldly in nature. Essential to the high demands that JRA requires and the resultant meaning produced is a belief such as the one Lindell gave from the pulpit one Sunday morning: “Heaven won’t be the same for everybody.” As a result, just being “saved” from an eternal Hell is not enough. One additional theory deserves attention in discussion of high demands, rational choice theory. This theory, most notably promoted by Laurence Iannaccone, says that strict religions thrive because they screen out “free riders”—“people with low levels of religious commitment” who “tend to take more than they give.”²²⁷ These people are dangerous to religious vitality because “their mere presence dilutes a group’s resources, reducing the average level of participation, enthusiasm, energy, and the like.”²²⁸

In a sermon titled “How to Avoid Being a Hypocrite,” Lindell told the congregation that no one will escape their deeds being exposed by God, for everything will be revealed. “Nothing escapes His notice,” Lindell said. Attendees routinely hear that “judgment is coming.” In “The Coming Kingdom,” people were told that Jesus’ coming will reveal people’s spiritual state; therefore, three things must be maintained: a life of holiness, a life of reverence, and a life of purity. A sermon titled “Questioning Christ’s Authority” (Luke 20:1-8) asked the congregation to consider these questions: “Is Jesus the authority in your life?”; “Does He control how you spend your time?”; “This past week did you spend time with Jesus?”; If not, did work, family, or television get in the way? People were challenged with the critique that “We say King Jesus, but it’s really King me.” At the end of the sermon on the “sign” of darkness, Lindell prayed for God to

²²⁶ Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America*, 249.

²²⁷ Iannaccone, “Why Strict Churches are Strong,” 1184.

²²⁸ Ibid.

“deliver us from the incessant trivialities of our lives” and to “jolt us loose from living as if this is never going to happen.”

Lindell had an extremely tough message for what we might call “free-riders” at JRA in his sermon “When Being Good is not Good Enough” (Luke 18:9-14): “You’re here this morning not because you love God and you’re not here because you’re that into spiritual things, but you’re here because it looks good on your résumé, it looks good for business, it helps you build association, it helps you get to know people that you feel can help you.” Lindell accused some people in the audience of being drunk on Friday, sleeping with someone outside of marriage last night, and now “you’re here because it makes everybody think you’re something you’re not.” In another sermon, Lindell asked people to prove their commitment and that God is the Lord of their life by being baptized if they were not already. People were told that if they are not baptized “you’re a Christian living in disobedience.” Consequently, eighteen people were baptized that evening.²²⁹

One way JRA produces high demands is by proving that God does the same. The people are told that “God is not some teddy bear . . . He demands our full devotion. He deserves our full devotion.” A message called “Blessed to be a Blessing”—which was aimed at recruiting volunteers—exhorted people that “Jesus expects a return on His investment,” referring to the gifts, talents, and abilities he has given to people. In a similar type of sermon, preached by Gibbons, people were told that “we will all give account for what we do with what He’s given us. It is critically important you realize this is actually going to happen someday.” This belief also extends to money and wealth. A sermon on giving money, “Investing in Your Future,” taught the congregation that they

²²⁹ Baptism receives heavy emphasis at JRA. Baptisms take place every time there is a Sunday night service (currently twice a month).

must prepare for eternity with how they use their wealth now. Christians are managers and stewards of God's wealth and must do what the true owner wants them to do with it. In another sermon called "Reasons Why I Give," Lindell gave as one of his reasons "When I get to Heaven, I want to have something there."²³⁰ People were told that how they give "will affect heaven" and "every offering you give, it's gonna be waiting for you in heaven."

Imminence

The belief that "judgment is coming" and that deeds will be "exposed" before God may only motivate the members at JRA so much. After all, they may think that this judgment is a far-off, distant event. How then can the church keep people motivated and highly committed? The three tenets of an apocalyptic worldview discussed so far all hinge on the fourth and final tenet, the doctrine of imminence. This is the belief that the period of end-time events, starting with the Rapture for dispensational premillennialists, is going to happen very soon.²³¹ All three tenets point to this moment. Thus, they all lead to the urgent question, "Are you ready?" The sermon about Jesus' coming revealing the spiritual state of people closed with the statement "Judgment is coming—are you ready?" The "sign" of devastation sermon ended with "Are you ready?" Lindell said in the message about darkness that "when the government writes that disasters occurred at twice the frequency in the last decade, what else could we conclude from this? Judgment is coming." People were then asked "Are you ready?" or will you live in "the horrors that are yet to come?" Lindell reviewed the purpose of previous sermons in "Ready or Not,

²³⁰ Money and the Christian at JRA will be more fully discussed in chapter four.

²³¹ In fact, Lindell mentioned that the doctrine of imminence is the main reason for a premillennial, pre-tribulation position.

Here He Comes,” by stating that when you see dissension, devastation, darkness, “and all these different cataclysms that we’ve looked at, you know that Jesus Christ, his return is very, very close.”

The message is clear almost every Sunday: people need to be ready.²³² While this exhortation is intended primarily to persuade unbelievers to make “a decision for Christ,” I argue that even if that is so, the weekly reminders of imminence make high demands more rewarding and serve to motivate members to remain highly committed. As with vindication, I will first prove the concept is a strong belief at JRA and then explain how it provides meaning and motivates commitment.

The Second Coming of Christ. Although different from the Rapture, the belief in the Second Coming inevitably connects to belief in the Rapture. According to the A/G Statement of Fundamental Truths, belief in a Second Coming is accompanied by the belief that Jesus will rapture his church before the Tribulation, which precedes the Second Coming.²³³ In fact, both in sermons and in my interviews, I found that these two beliefs often are discussed together or even considered the same thing. In “Ready or Not, Here He Comes,” Lindell said that “when we talk about the Second Coming of Christ, the Rapture of the church is really [the issue because] it inaugurates a series of events that culminate with his literal return to earth.” I have already described the defensive position of JRA against attacks on this issue, but I will now give its offensive position.

²³² Wacker says that historically, Pentecostalism has had an “overwhelming feeling of urgency.” He cites the very first issue of the Azusa Mission’s *Apostolic Faith* periodical that exclaimed “time is short” and soon “it will be too late to prepare” (*Heaven Below*, 257).

²³³ This belief is under fundamental truth fourteen, “The Millennial Reign of Christ.” It reads, “The second coming of Christ includes the rapture of the saints, which is our blessed hope, followed by the visible return of Christ with His saints to reign on the earth for one thousand years (Zechariah 14:5; Matthew 24:27, 30; Revelation 1:7; 19:11-14; 20:1-6)” (Assemblies of God USA, “Statement of Fundamental Truths”).

In the introduction to the Advent sermons on the Second Coming, Lindell began with building a case for the Second Coming. He told the congregation that one out of every thirty verses in the Bible deals with Jesus' return or his Second Coming. Furthermore, he said there are over three hundred references to the return of Jesus in the New Testament. These arguments were repeated again in "The Coming Kingdom" and "Signs of the Second Coming." He then gave five reasons Jesus is coming back: 1) The Word of God demands it, 2) The teaching of Jesus demands it, 3) The corruption of the world demands it, 4) The future of Israel demands it,²³⁴ and 5) The destruction of Satan demands it. Three of these reasons were given once again, and in more detail, in "Signs of the Second Coming." In that sermon, after saying there are over three hundred distinct prophecies of Jesus' coming, Lindell cited Peter Stoner and his book *Science Speaks*, which explains that the probability that one person would fulfill even eight prophecies is 1:10¹⁷ or one to one-hundred-quadrillion. He then explained that of the over three hundred prophecies about Jesus, one-third pertain to his first coming "and He came." The other two-thirds have to do with his Second Coming, and "you can be assured" that if the one-third came true, then the two-thirds will as well.

This evidence leads to a belief that the Rapture could occur at anytime. At the end of the "Signs" sermon just discussed, Lindell encouraged the congregation to consider the evidence and to "be found ready" for the coming of the Lord. This ending to the sermon is one of many weekly reminders of Jesus' soon coming that is expressed in the ritual of the altar call. This ritual will be more fully introduced and described in chapter four when

²³⁴ Here Lindell told the congregation not to buy into "replacement theology" (the belief that the Christian church replaces Israel in fulfillment of biblical prophecies and promises for Israel).

discussing the core identity of “reaching the lost,” but for now, the concern is how this ritual promotes the doctrine of imminence.

The Altar Call. In discussing the altar call at JRA, it is important to consider Nancy Ammerman’s discussion of religious rituals:

The single most common congregational activity is, in fact, the ritual of a weekly worship event. It is in this event that congregations engage in their most dramatic rituals, their most intentional presentation of who they are. In a powerful sense, worship is an event that is meant to express the unifying vision of the congregation . . . [a ritual] is a predictable activity that is intended to express something beyond itself.²³⁵

Almost without exception, an altar call is given each Sunday at the end of each service.

Among other things, the altar call weekly communicates one of the most important doctrines of JRA: Jesus is coming soon. As Lindell said on Vision Sunday 2007, “We feel we are living in the last days.” This belief that the time is near is also considered under attack. In the sermon “Are you Ready?” Lindell said that the “lie of this age” is that “there is no hurry [to make a decision for Christ].” The following is only a small percentage of like statements that were spoken during the altar call in my months of observation: “Today is the appointed time. Now is the hour”; “The time is short. He is coming soon”; “You’re not guaranteed you’ll sit in this sanctuary next week”; “Soon it will be too late to get to heaven, and you’ll spend an eternity in Hell”; “Escape the coming judgment”; Jesus “could come back today”; “Don’t leave this place without getting right with God—that would be a tragedy”; “I would advise against delaying that decision [to “follow Christ”]”; “Judgment is coming. Save yourself.” Scotty Gibbons once used the common Christian metaphor of a courtroom scenario where the sinner is accused by God. He told the people that they better “settle [their accounts] while there is

²³⁵ Ammerman, “Culture and Identity,” 84.

time.”²³⁶ Furthermore, at the volunteer rally before the 2007 “I Love America” outreach, Lindell encouraged the volunteers to take the event seriously, for this could be the last one because “Jesus could be coming back soon.”

It is important to note that the altar call exhortation is always directed at two groups of people, the believer and the unbeliever. Lindell, or whoever is preaching, always begins with a challenge for believers to examine their own hearts to see if they “are ready” for Jesus’ coming, or if they may need to “recommit their lives to Christ.” Thus, imminence encourages members of the congregation to remain highly committed because, among other reasons, Jesus could come back at any moment. As Lindell said in “Ready or Not, Here He Comes,” “[belief in the Rapture] has a purifying effect; it has a motivating effect. Because if you don’t know when He’s going to come, guess what—you want to be ready for when He comes.”

Conclusion: Apocalypticism and Vitality

Apocalyptic Adherents. The voice of the people of JRA has not yet been heard. Is there evidence that members not only embrace an apocalyptic worldview, but also find it appealing and motivating? Because my conclusions were developed by finding common strands and themes *after* months of observations and interviews, I did not ask questions in my interviews about every tenet of apocalypticism.²³⁷ Nevertheless, much conversation emerged about these topics. When I asked about the Second Coming, the question was either interpreted as or led to discussion about the Rapture. Kevin called it

²³⁶ Gibbons used Revelation 20:11ff. as his springboard for this comment. The Christian courtroom metaphor goes back as far as Paul and the book of Romans and has been adopted by important figures like John Calvin.

²³⁷ However, I did ask, “What do you think about the Second Coming of Christ?” and “Are things getting better or worse in the world?”

“the next greatest event for every believer.” Melissa said, “I believe we’re going to see the Second Coming in our lifetime. When our kids are—or maybe when our grandkids are—I don’t know when, but I know it’s going to be coming soon and we’ll be raptured; we’ll be with Him if we know Him.” Katie confirmed her belief in this event as well: “I believe that the Lord will call the believer home so that we’ll be raptured up to Heaven. You know, the dead will be raised first . . . there will be a period of judgment.” Nick says, “He is coming back, and He will bring His faithful to Him . . . As Christians, we believe everyday that today could be the day. You know, we’re not guaranteed a tomorrow for sure because the Lord could come back at anytime.”²³⁸

Belief in the Second Coming or rapture seems firm, as does the possibility that it will or could happen soon. However, does it motivate and is there evidence that the people want “high demands and distinctive boundaries”? I will use Kevin as an example of what I consider the common attitude among members. Kevin, who admittedly is hesitant about Jesus coming soon because he has “heard it for thirty years, you know?” still said that it motivates him to live ready and to evangelize:

Whether it’s gonna happen in my generation or not, I really don’t know. But the bottom line for me is I just want to be ready, and I just want to live ready and encourage other people to be ready. I do believe it can happen anytime. It’s like our pastor, you know, he’s been preaching a series on Luke, and a lot of it’s been dealing with end time events. And he said, “Right now, it can happen any time.” And I believe that, and I probably need to convey that too, in my speech, to

²³⁸ A common question asked is how believers justify the continuous delay of Jesus’ coming. The most common answer is that God, in His mercy, is waiting for more people to receive the Good News (cf. 2 Peter 3). Lindell exemplified this belief when he said from the pulpit, “This then is our job, this then is why His coming is delayed,” to give people a chance to repent. Katie said that Jesus will return “when every people group is reached.” Nick said that unreached people groups “would have to hear the name of Jesus before the Lord would decide, ‘Okay, this is the right time.’ And that’s just what the Word says; it’s not just what I think.” As a result, believers can help bring about the soon return of Jesus by evangelizing. This justification, then, also contributes to motivating members to be committed to JRA’s vision.

others—to encourage them, “Hey, are you ready? I mean, if Jesus Christ was to come back today, would you be ready?”²³⁹

Kevin also sees imminence as a proper and perhaps even necessary tool to motivate: “If we have to scare them a little bit I guess—tell them that Jesus is coming soon, to get ready, to be ready, to live ready—if that’s what it takes then that’s okay.” Kevin may get this attitude from his pastor, who has said, “The Bible is very clear that fear is an appropriate motivation [to get “right with Jesus”].” A good example of the way fear produces committed members is a Sunday night baptism in July 2008. When asked why she was being baptized, the woman responded, “This morning Pastor Scotty said that Jesus could come back at any time so I’m taking, like, immediate action.”

High demands and well-defined boundaries are important to Kevin as well. On his first ever visit to JRA, Lindell preached a very tough and strict sermon against divorce. Instead of turning him away, Kevin cited it as one of the main reasons he and his family decided to come to JRA. He commented on strict sermons in general:

Hearing [tough messages] from a church of this size and this stature, you know, again it’s one of those stereotype things where you think that all big churches don’t preach the Word and that’s why they’re big; people can come in and be comfortable and not have to get their feathers ruffled, you know, kind of thing. But that’s not the case here at this church. John preaches the word, he preaches hard—he preaches with mercy, with grace—and at the same time he lets the fire fall and says, “If you don’t know Christ you’re gonna go to Hell.” I mean, I really appreciate that.

He would again comment on Lindell’s sermons later in the conversation: “The bottom line is, you know, he just wants people to know that they can’t skate into heaven. You gotta make sure that you’re living the life.”

²³⁹ Compare this to Lindell in a “Signs of the Second Coming” sermon: “We owe it to people to warn them if judgment is coming. In doing so you join a long line of righteous people.”

A Dissenting View. As I mentioned in the introduction, my reasons and their supportive theories will not work for every person in the congregation. A case in point in discussing strictness is Christi, who left the church in 2003. Instead of keeping her a motivated and committed member at JRA, the tough messages and distinctive boundaries pushed her away. I asked her how she saw JRA change over the ten years she was there:

It became much more legalistic, much more legalistic. There didn't seem to me [pause] to be the grace that was at one point in the church. The compassion for the fallen. The understanding that not everybody's there yet—super Christian. I think I experienced that in a sense personally because I had one [child] that was very attached into the church but two [children] that weren't, and it was hard. If you weren't there every Sunday morning, Sunday night, Wednesday night, if you weren't at all the youth's, if you weren't a big prayer warrior and you weren't quotin' the Scriptures, you know, and all of that. You don't know how many times I would hear people say, "Well, they don't know the Lord" or "they just aren't walking with God." Well, it began to impress upon my heart, "who am I to say you don't know the Lord or who am I to say you're not walkin' with God?"

She went on to say that the weakest link in the body of Christ is that "we want to see them saved, delivered, and spotless all at once and we're not willing to walk it out, to walk the journey." I asked Christi why she thought JRA has continued to grow, and she gave a very revealing and interesting answer: "We're all different and there are some people that like more of a boxed-in, more of a [pause]—boundaries, more boundaries around them." Even though Christi is not one of them, she realizes that many people want boundaries and that JRA creates them for people is one of the main reasons for its growth.

Pessimism and Privilege. In the concluding section of his book, Paul Boyer argues that apocalyptic vision and premillennialism provide "not only the emotional benefits of being part of a shared network of belief but also a privileged source of

knowledge.”²⁴⁰ Thus, I will add one more contribution an apocalyptic worldview makes to congregational vitality: a sense of privilege and confidence about the future. This sense is most apparent when discussing troubling world events with people. In discussing the coming of Jesus, Nick said he believes that “the world is constantly getting worse and worse, and we see that everyday . . . The Bible shows us that there’s going to be famines. There’s already been places in the world where they’ve turned into deserts, and there’s just going to be more than that.” Katie said the world is getting worse “because it’s a sign of the end of the ages where the Lord’s probably unleashing some wrath right now.” Kevin said that things are only “going to get worse. Jesus talked about that, you know famines, pestilence. I mean, look at what’s happening with the price of gas, you know even things economical—not just catastrophes and disasters, but the economy, I mean everything. It’s gonna get worse. Sin is going to increase. We’ve seen that, it’s increasing. I believe it’s just going to get worse.”

When speaking with these members I was struck not only by their pessimism, but also by how they did not seem panicked or troubled by these scenarios; they were perfectly calm. Christian Smith says that American evangelicals not only believe in universal Truth, but also believe “that *they* are the ones who know it because God has revealed it to them.”²⁴¹ As Lindell said in “The Coming Kingdom,” “as Christians, we know how this earth will end.” Thus, despite large events like natural disasters and small events like the price of gas, many people at JRA remain confident. After all, these are only signs of the (end) times.

²⁴⁰ Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*, 309.

²⁴¹ Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, 126; emphasis his. In this section, Smith is speaking of Truth “with a capital ‘T.’”

Apocalypticism has several functions in contributing to vitality at JRA. In this chapter I have shown the importance of “intense otherworldliness” and its contribution to religious motivation and church growth. Additionally, the promise of both judgment and reward in the afterlife found in the belief of vindication provides the necessary high demands of strictness theory and motivates sacrifice within the congregation. Subcultural identity theory also explains how an apocalyptic worldview contributes to vitality. This argument mainly focused on the issue of the Second Coming, but traces were also found under vindication where “Hell’s come upon hard times” as well as under imminence where doubters of this doctrine promote the “lie of this age.” An apocalyptic worldview also gives believers a sense of privilege about the future and therefore increases confidence and commitment within the congregation. The perspective of members such as Kevin showed that members of JRA find apocalyptic teachings appealing because they encourage members to “be ready” for the coming of Christ. These teachings not only focus on preparing the individual, but encourage them to warn others to be ready for the judgment that is to come. It is this warning of others, what JRA calls “reaching the lost,” that brings us to the last key to vitality at JRA.

CHAPTER FOUR

IDENTITY AND WORTHY PURSUIT:

JRA'S "REACHING THE LOST" AS A KEY TO VITALITY

There are many prodigal sons.
On our city streets they run,
Searching for shelter.
There are homes broken down.
People's hopes have fallen to the ground
From failures.
This is an emergency.
There are tears from the saints
For the lost and unsaved.
We're crying for them come back home . . .
Father, we will lead them home.

This verse and chorus represent one of the few songs JRA has used enough to become somewhat of an anthem for the church.²⁴² The song captures the primary identity and mission of JRA: reaching the "lost" and "unsaved." Nancy Ammerman says that the most critical element to a congregation's vitality is "the extent to which the congregation is able to offer its members a strong sense of identity."²⁴³ The FACT study found that "congregations with a clear sense of purpose feel vital and alive."²⁴⁴ Christian Smith labels six distinct dimensions of religious vitality, one of which is commitment to the mission of the church.²⁴⁵ Scott Thumma says a vital church must have an "identifiable purpose," a "core vision,"²⁴⁶ and a "unique identity"²⁴⁷ to attract people. However,

²⁴² From the song "Tears of the Saints," by a Christian band named Leeland. This song has been used at least five different times for the "special music" portion of the service.

²⁴³ Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, 50.

²⁴⁴ Faith Communities Today, "Clarity of Purpose and Vitality."

²⁴⁵ Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, 21.

²⁴⁶ Thumma, "The Kingdom, The Power, and The Glory," 472-73.

Thumma emphasizes that “a unique identity does not, by itself, produce a successful product. It must also be accompanied by significant substance and a loyal audience.”²⁴⁸ The identity “must have a large community for whom the idea makes sense.”²⁴⁹ Thus, a megachurch must offer two things to attract committed people: “a clear, well-defined identity, and that this identity be a worthy pursuit.”²⁵⁰ This chapter will argue that the identity of JRA rests solidly in the mission of reaching the lost, and that the congregation embraces this identity as a “worthy pursuit.” The people of JRA are told that there are lost people around them “searching for shelter,” and it is their mission and the mission of the church to “lead them home.” This chapter will explore five areas that present evidence for JRA’s identity of reaching the lost and its being a worthy pursuit: the altar call, money, material culture, social outreach, and special events.

Reaching the Lost

Ammerman says that each congregation has a “mission orientation,” which is “its sense of how God works in the world and what God wants people to do.”²⁵¹ At JRA, God’s desire is to reach those who are lost and he wants people to participate.²⁵² In the sermon “God’s Greatest Joy” (Luke 15:8-10), Lindell asked, “What gives God joy? Recovering lost people.” The sermon taught the Parable of the Lost Coin in which a woman loses a coin, lights a lamp, and sweeps the house until she finds it. Lindell’s

²⁴⁷ Thumma, “The Kingdom, The Power, and The Glory,” 68.

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 473.

²⁵⁰ Scott Thumma, “Exploring the Megachurch.”

²⁵¹ Ammerman, “Culture and Identity,” 100.

²⁵² Ammerman would label this the “evangelistic orientation” in which the church is “actively involved in seeking individuals who need salvation and thereby changing the world one person at a time” (“Culture and Identity,” 100).

challenge to the congregation was “Are you willing to search carefully for sinners? Are you a light or a broom?” Lindell told the church one Wednesday night that “God is always about reaching the lost” and people should “find out what God is doing and get involved.” Nick said, “We have the responsibility to do God’s mission while we’re here on earth, and that is to reach as many people as we can with the gospel of Jesus Christ.” The praise reports discussed in chapter two showed God as healer and financial provider, but the third main category of praise reports showed God as one who saves (see Table 1). A sense of how God works in the world and how people should react is evident in these reports:²⁵³

1. praying for years for nephew, who came to Realife and got saved
2. witnessing to co-worker, who finally came to James River and got saved
3. first time her relative stepped into a church for thirty years
4. son saved and baptized
5. (report written by a child) her dad wanted to leave the family, got saved and baptized, family restored
6. praying nine years for niece—last Sunday gave her heart to the Lord
7. friend away from God, God saved her—now free from alcohol, clean
8. saved, free from addiction
9. after ten years of praying for niece, she came to the Lord
10. friend had walked away from Lord, last week came and rededicated her life
11. praying for husband for three years, wanted to give up, fasted for 3 days, he then came forward that Sunday to receive Christ
12. wife whose husband came to a Life Group
13. four ladies in Greene county jail gave hearts to the Lord
14. uncle saved
15. woman brought friend to JRA Women’s Rally—got saved
16. praying for grandfather for seven years, got saved
17. forty young people committed lives to Christ at youth rally Wednesday night
18. brother gave his life to the Lord on Tuesday
19. ladies saved in prison outreach
20. uncle who was an atheist all his life saved on Friday
21. first water well drilled in Tanzania, eight villagers led to the Lord as result
22. friend received salvation
23. thirty-two years praying for friend, who walked the aisle Sunday morning after I Love America outreach

²⁵³ For a description of how these praise reports are announced to the congregation, see my discussion in chapter two.

24. sick uncle, needed to be saved, got saved the same week the person turned in a prayer card

From the top down at JRA, the main mission or identity of the church is reaching the lost. The number one “core value” of the church is listed as “Reaching the Lost,” and the other six core values all flow into that one. The mission statement of the church has only three points, and the first one is “Reaching People for Christ.” “The day we stop doing it is the day we are finished,” said Lindell. Certainly, this emphasis does not make JRA an anomaly. Fifty-eight percent of megachurches reported evangelism to be a key activity, and all but 5% claim to have some emphasis on it.²⁵⁴ In the FACT survey, 58% of A/G churches say the sermon *always* focuses on making a personal commitment to Christ or salvation, and 39% say they do this *often*.²⁵⁵ Moreover, David Bebbington’s four ingredients of evangelicalism include both “conversionism” (emphasis on a born-again experience) and “activism” (concern for sharing the faith).²⁵⁶ Nevertheless, JRA’s consistent emphasis on reaching the lost still seems unique when compared to many churches. When I asked Curt Cook what the main mission of JRA is, he responded, “Oh, definitely to reach the lost. Since the inception of the church in ’91, that’s been the primary focus. We are here to reach the lost.” Ken said, “We’re an evangelical church. We’re about people being saved. I’ll say it again, we’re about people being saved . . . We are to spread the gospel. That’s what our church is about . . . that’s what we do . . . that’s our first goal.”

²⁵⁴ Thumma, “Megachurches Today.”

²⁵⁵ Faith Communities Today, “FACT Survey Results.”

²⁵⁶ Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Britain*, 2-17.

Numbers Matter. From its first “convert” in January 1992, JRA has been keeping tabs on the number of souls saved. The constant reporting of these numbers speaks to the church’s emphasis on this part of its identity. As will be seen, if people are not being reached with the gospel, then an event is hardly worth doing. The church’s annual report brochure, made available to the congregation each year, always highlights how many “decisions for Christ” were made. In 2007, 2,544 people were recorded as making a decision to follow Christ. From 2004-2007, a total of 9,157 decisions were made. These numbers are not just relegated to the annual report. Almost weekly, a tally is given on how many people came to know Christ through a service, special event, or outreach. A typical example would be a Sunday night service in July 2008, when Lindell announced that twenty-six people made decisions for Christ that morning and eighty-six people had come to Christ the last three Sundays. Lindell reported in May 2008 that in the month of April, 350 people came to know Christ. In September 2007, the congregation was told that seventy people made decisions for the Lord at a youth outreach. In October 2007, Lindell reported that thirty-four people were saved the past Sunday. At the end of November 2007, Lindell told the congregation, “We’re in a season of wonderful salvations.” The list could go on.

Volunteerism. It takes over 3,000 volunteers every Sunday to hold services at JRA. Kevin and his family spend at least ten hours a week at the church, participate in a Life Group, and are at all three services every Sunday because they volunteer in the ones they do not attend. Katie said her favorite thing about the church is that “the spirit of volunteerism is unlike anything I’ve ever seen before. The amount of volunteers that you have to have to make a church of our size function is just phenomenal; I can’t even

comprehend it. And Pastor Lindell has just such an awesome way of inspiring people to volunteer and step up in leadership.” How is JRA motivating thousands of people to give up their time each Sunday, not to mention for special events? What does Lindell say to “inspire” people to give up their time? At least part of the answer is the opportunity for people to participate in the core identity of reaching the lost. The switch to three services required a massive increase in volunteers. However, people responded, possibly because Lindell constantly emphasized that the purpose of three services is “to make room for the lost.” This feeling of participation—the worthy pursuit—will be especially important in discussing special events such as I Love America.

How Lost are the “Lost”? The question that ultimately needs to be asked is “Where are these supposedly ‘lost’ people coming from?” Chapter one described the Ozarks as a heavily church area where Christianity is the dominant worldview. Kimon Sargeant’s research data on seeker churches suggests that new attendees with no religious background (the “unchurched”) are not the main source of growth. Rather, the growth of these megachurches “may have more to do with the ‘circulation of the saints’ than with the conversion of the unchurched.”²⁵⁷ He concludes: “The success of seeker churches has less to do with converting secular people than with providing people who have a tenuous denominational loyalty and an unclear religious identity (though likely some type of Christian identity) a connection to institutional religion.”²⁵⁸ When I attended a membership orientation class, out of the thirty or so new members, not one claimed to be

²⁵⁷ Sargeant, *Seeker Churches*, 30. The term “circulation of the saints” is from Reginald W. Bibby and Merlin B. Brinkerhoff, “The Circulation of the Saints,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 12 (September 1973): 273-282.

²⁵⁸ Sargeant, *Seeker Churches*, 30.

a new Christian. Kevin understands this “circulation of the saints,” but is not bothered by it.

I think too that the reason that the church has grown—obviously, they want to see people get saved and I think that’s part of it. People have gotten saved, they’ve gotten plugged in, they’re in the discipleship mode, and that’s happening—but I think another reason why the church has grown is because the church attracts people from other churches because it’s got its act together. And I think that’s okay—I mean, if they come here and their motives are good.

The majority of people described themselves as former Baptist or some other denomination or as people who have been in the A/G for a while. Ken, a former Southern Baptist, credits JRA with helping him “sell out completely” to the Lord when he came eight years ago, but he says that he was saved at age seven and does “not know an unsaved life.”

Is reaching the lost a part of vitality and growth because it brings in new “unchurched” people or because it rallies together those who are already believers and unites them with a common purpose? The answer is likely both. Of course, much depends on how a “lost” person is described, as JRA’s definition of those in need of salvation may be very different from that of the church down the street. Nevertheless, the important idea for this chapter is that the core identity of JRA is to reach the lost and this identity is seen as a worthy pursuit for the people. How “lost” the people actually are is not as important for discussing vitality. At JRA, there are always more lost people to be reached. One Wednesday night, after reviewing all the lost people being saved recently at JRA, Lindell announced “there’s more for us” and said there are tens of thousands in the area that do not know Jesus. The guest speaker for the annual February Missions Convention said, “There are people in Springfield that are just as lost as in Calcutta . . . You are either a missionary or a mission field.” Melissa said that the church is growing because “there’s

people getting saved all the time . . . you just can't stop that kind of growth. I mean, it's great, it's healthy."

The U.S. Congregations study reported that 47 percent of people visit a church for the first time because someone invited them. In comparison, only 6 percent come for the first time due to advertising.²⁵⁹ Thus, a large portion of the growth at JRA is likely due to personal invites. But why would someone want to invite a friend to church? One answer is that it enables a person to feel like he or she is participating in the vision of the church. Dean Kelly's theory that "*meaning = concept + demand*" is helpful here.²⁶⁰ The concept (reaching the lost) demands that people invite people to church (worthy pursuit), which creates meaning for the member. This pattern will be found repeatedly throughout the chapter.

This mission and identity of JRA is also a way for it to maintain a committed and loyal base. The rest of the chapter will give several examples of how this happens, but I will give two here. First, the switch from Bible Fellowship (Sunday school) to Life Groups (small groups) at JRA was controversial. People who had been in the same class with the same people for years were understandably upset. How did JRA rally the people together? In his sermon on the switch to Life Groups, Lindell gave several reasons for the change, one obviously being that it is biblical. Another reason was "It's an opportunity to reach the lost." "Everything else in Christianity we can do better in heaven," Lindell said. He mentioned that tens of thousands of people will never come to a church, but they will go to a home. He then said that if you are in a Life Group that splits every eighteen

²⁵⁹ U.S. Congregations, "Myths and Facts about Evangelicalism and Church Growth," <http://www.uscongregations.org/growth.htm> (accessed September 18, 1008).

²⁶⁰ Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches are Growing*, 52.

months (as intended), you will impact 640 people in nine years. The goal, he said, is to have 800 groups in the area within nine years. If two people are discipled in each group, that is 1,600 “lost people saved.” The identity of reaching the lost also keeps people from complaining too much. As mentioned, music has been a controversy at the church. David Lindell says he would certainly like to hear a hymn more often but he understands why the church does not do it: “Their goal is to reach out to people mainly who aren’t saved . . . The leadership feels like the simpler the worship choruses contain a more simplified theology [that “unchurched” people will understand].” Before discussing more examples like these in detail, I must discuss the most important ritual at JRA related to reaching the lost: the altar call.

The Altar Call

Ammerman says that “the congregation’s rituals are one way that it tells the story of God’s activity.”²⁶¹ Sunday morning is when congregations “engage in their most dramatic rituals, their most intentional presentation of their sense of identity.”²⁶² It is through the ritual of the altar call that JRA communicates God’s activity of reaching the lost. Donald Miller states that “conversions are not going to occur unless a church affirms their efficacy and regularly provides occasions that trigger their occurrence.”²⁶³ The altar call allows JRA to establish and weekly remind people of the main identity of the church. As David Lindell said, the most important belief of the congregation is that “the lost come to know Jesus Christ and make a commitment publically about that; so every Sunday there will be some sort of altar call where people are asked to make a decision to

²⁶¹ Ammerman, “Culture and Identity,” 86.

²⁶² Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, 55.

²⁶³ Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, 78.

follow Christ . . . Every Sunday people need to be given an opportunity to follow Christ.”

Katie said that “when you look at the fact that there’s an altar call at the end of every service for salvation, that alone, you know. It’s not like ‘Okay, who needs prayer because of what we just talked about today?’ It’s always like, ‘Who needs prayer for salvation?’ So that alone just speaks that the point of James River is to reach out to the unsaved.”

No other activity communicates JRA’s identity of reaching the lost more than the Sunday morning altar call. During one altar call, Lindell told the people, “This is why we exist as a church.” When asked what the most important part of the service is, most members went straight to the end. David Lindell said without hesitation, “The end. Asking people to make a decision to follow Christ is the most important.” Ken said, “I love an altar call.” Nick had this to say:

The most important part is when Pastor gives the opportunity for salvation. It happens every Sunday morning . . . The most important aspect is that moment that you’re able to give an account. Those people who have been coming to James River and still aren’t saved or who were saved and have fallen from the faith and need to be rededicated. You know, the Word is great, and the Word is encouraging to Christians, but just like the most important part of the church is evangelism, the most important part is reaching those people who have come to the church and who need to be saved, not willing that they would leave the church not knowing the Lord, because we’re not guaranteed another day. So it’s important that people make a decision right then and there and that it’s a physical decision, you take an action and you go up to the front. And, you know, that has been remarkable seeing every Sunday people come to know the Lord and have a personal walk in relationship with Christ.

Nick’s statement illuminates some important aspects of the altar call at JRA. To better explain this crucial ritual, I will discuss several parts of the altar call in detail.

The Transition. The transition from the sermon to the altar call always begins with something like, “I’m going to ask everyone to have their heads bowed, eyes closed—nobody moving or nobody looking around.” At this time, the band quietly makes

its way back onto the stage. Lindell or whoever is preaching then begins a prayer, but the prayer soon evolves into more of a teaching or exhortation for people to “get right with God.” No amen is given; the prayer simply transitions into talking directly to the people. This is the quietest part of the whole service. At this point, the pastor enters into the plea for people to accept Christ.

The Plea. The plea for people to make a decision for Christ is addressed to two groups of people: those who need to “recommit” or “rededicate” their life and those who need to “commit their life to Christ” for the first time. The first group is those who are “backslidden, you’re away from God.” Lindell often uses the line “you were better off when you were walking close to God than you are today.” The second group is often referred to as those who need “salvation,” to be “born again” or “saved.” He spends most of the time talking to the second group. After this initial plea is made, the pastor once again reminds people not to be moving or looking around, and then people are asked to “without hesitation” “lift your hand up so I know that we’re praying together.” They are asked to raise their hand and “lift it high” to indicate if they want to make a decision for Christ or if they “want to open the door of your life to Jesus.” As hands go up, hosts (ushers) nearby will raise one arm and point with the other so the pastor can know the general area of where the hand went up. He will recognize the hand by saying something like “on my left, thank you”; “in the stadium, God bless you”; “back there, praise God”; “here in the front, wonderful.” As the hands go up, the pastor continues to plead with the people. He continually asks, “Are there others?” or “Are there others this morning and you’d just lift your hand and say, ‘I want that, I want God’s power in my life.’” Or, “Are there others that would say, ‘John, pray for me’” or “You’re saying, ‘John, I want to

make that decision’ or ‘I want that.’” Throughout this process, from the prayer to the pleading to the raising of the hands, several types of pleas are made to persuade people to come forward. For example, people are told that the rapid beating of their heart is “the Holy Spirit trying to get your attention” or that the “tug” on their heart is God trying to tell them something. Most of these pleas can be placed into one of three categories. For each category, I will supply an abundance of quotations from different altar calls in order to give a better understanding of what the moment is like.

Personal Fulfillment. This category focuses on what chapter two calls “the soft sell” of the Christian message, which stresses “the satisfactions and psychological fulfillment that Christian faith offers.”²⁶⁴ Thus, the following types of pleas are used by the pastor: “It’s so wonderful, you don’t want to miss it”; “A God who is able to make an incredible difference in your life”; If you do not respond, you are “missing out on life’s greatest power, life’s greatest joy, and life’s greatest gift—the greatest thing there is in all of life”; “He’ll transform your life”; “You don’t want to miss this”; “God has something wonderful for you . . . I can’t wait for you to experience His goodness in your life”; “It’s such a joy to know Jesus”; You can experience “true love and the joy, hope, and peace that it brings”; “It’s so exciting, so thrilling”; “You can leave with great joy today”; “This is your day, this is your time, this is your moment”; “Experience His joy, His peace”; “God has amazing plans for you. He wants to bless you”; “He wants you to know Him—His forgiveness, His joy, His peace.”

Urgency (Fear and Doubt). Several sermons preached at JRA make it very clear that the JRA staff believes a person can come to a point at which he or she no longer is capable of receiving salvation. In one sermon Lindell said that there comes a point where

²⁶⁴ Sargeant, *Seeker Churches*, 13.

after not believing for so long, you cannot believe and are “no longer capable” of responding to the gospel. A few weeks later, he said one’s heart can become “permanently hardened.” He explained that blaspheming the Holy Spirit (Luke 12:10) represents coming to a place at which one can no longer respond to God. For this reason, Lindell said, “Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your heart” (Hebrews 3:15). One particular sermon from the end-times series on Luke focused specifically on the issue of eternal security. Kevin, who called it an “interesting Sunday,” summarized, “He basically said that if somebody’s not living for Christ, then they were never saved.” Others I interviewed expressed confusion and unease about the sermon. Kevin said the sermon “shook me up a little bit” when he considered the possibility of never being saved in the first place. He commented: “I think it kind of shook some folks up. As a matter of fact, we had some pretty awesome altar calls that Sunday because a lot of people wanted to make sure they were saved [laughs].” Kevin, who works on the altar ministry team, laughed as he noted that everyone marked *salvation* on the commitment form that week instead of *rededication*. During the Sunday night baptisms a few weeks later, one of the men getting baptized said that he had been “saved” for thirty years, but after Lindell’s sermon on security he was not sure anymore so he decided to (re)commit his life to Christ and get baptized.

This uncertainty leads to pleas that appeal to people’s fear and doubt about salvation and eternity. Therefore, the decision becomes more urgent: “When you push him and push him away, God’s a gentleman, and He’ll just let you go . . . He’s not going to force Himself on you”; “Every time you’re faced with the truth and you walk away undecided, you’ve rejected Him”; “Don’t leave today without opening up your heart to

Him.” Fear is also used in the classic evangelical plea that a person may never have another chance: “You’re not sure if you died tonight you’d go to heaven”; “You’re not even guaranteed you’ll make it home for lunch today”; “You are one heartbeat away from sealing your eternity”; “If your life did end today, where would you go?; “You’re not guaranteed tomorrow”; “You never know when it will be too late to pray that prayer; “If you died right now, would you spend eternity in Heaven or would you spend eternity in Hell?”; “We don’t hold the future in our hands.” Also included in the category of urgency would be the many pleas dealing with the imminent return of Jesus, covered in chapter three. This category of pleas also fits well with Finke and Stark’s high demand model of religious vitality.

Why Wouldn’t You? It is apparent by now that JRA believes that salvation is a moment, something that can happen in an instant—hence, the emphasis upon a decision. Kevin said this about becoming a Christian: “It is spontaneous, it’s instant. The minute you make that decision to follow Christ, you pray the prayer of salvation, if you were to die the next day you would go to heaven. It’s instantaneous.” Melissa said, “It is a one-time thing.” This “instantaneous” belief leads to the “why would you not want to do this?” approach during the altar call: “You are one prayer away from having all your sin removed”; “Don’t leave today without opening up your heart to him”; “The only people who will be in Hell will be those who refuse to pray a prayer of dedication”; “You’re one prayer away from making peace with God”; “Why’d you come to church if you didn’t want to be made right with God?”; “I don’t know what would keep you from making that decision”; “You say, ‘I want to leave tonight knowing I’m going to Heaven instead of Hell’”; “Do you realize that you are one prayer away?”; “You can leave this place

knowing God”; “Don’t stand there where you are. Don’t miss another opportunity”; “You can leave here this morning knowing the Lord and His power in your life”; “If you’re not sure you’re ready, you come.” Ultimately, this “why wouldn’t you?” approach, along with the focus on personal fulfillment and urgency, leads to the need for a response.

The Response. The pleas for people to make a decision for Christ continue while the pastor asks people to lift their hand. Eventually, when all the hands have been raised, people are asked to “step out and come” down to the altar. It takes some encouragement, but soon dozens of people fill the aisles and come to the front where they are greeted by “altar workers.” As soon as people are asked to come, the band starts into a song singing lines such as “Jesus I believe in you/ Jesus I belong to you” or “I need you Jesus/ to come to my rescue.” The two most popular choruses are probably the following:

Come just as you are,
Hear the Spirit call.
Come just as you are.
Come and see, come receive,
Come and live forever.

Or,

Come unto Jesus,
Give Him your heart today.
Come unto Jesus,
Let Him have His Way.

As one of these songs is sung, pleas for people to come forward continue over the music:

“If you’re saying ‘man, I wish I had raised my hand,’ you can still come”; “Do it as a family, a couple, a group”; “Bring your friend, bring your wife, bring your husband”; “Don’t miss this opportunity. Be right with God.” The hosts approach people who raised their hands but did not go forward. Often people leave their seats and follow the usher down the aisle, but many times people shake their head no. Occasionally, the pastor will

ask every person in the congregation to turn to the left and the right and ask the people next to him or her if they want to go down or ask them if they need to get right with God.

The Exit. Once all the people make their way to the altar, the song ends and the pastor briefly prays for those making a commitment. The new converts are then asked to move stage left to a side room where they will receive Bibles and some other materials. As they walk to the side room, the pastor exhorts the audience to “cheer ‘em on” and “Let’s welcome these folks into the family of God.” Resounding applause and loud cheering breaks out at this point. The pastor continues to say things like, “That’s great—that’s so awesome. C’mon, let’s cheer ‘em on.” The congregation is told that this is “a significant moment in eternity.” It is not uncommon for those in the congregation to be teary-eyed as they clap and watch people exit. Some stretch out their hands toward the people, a common Pentecostal way to pray for someone from a distance. Undoubtedly, it is probably an emotional moment as well for many of those who went forward. I happened to talk to a man sitting next to me one Sunday who had gone forward just a few weeks ago. He described that moment of exit as “like walking through the gates of heaven—the thunderous applause—it’s amazing.”²⁶⁵ After the new converts exit, Lindell or another pastor transitions the applause and says, “Now, let’s thank the Lord.” The volume of the cheering and clapping rises. Many lift their faces and raise their clapping hands upward. Others stop clapping and simply raise both arms up in the air.

Follow-Up. For JRA to grow as it has and retain such committed members, one would assume there is a sufficient effort to connect the new converts to the church and get them involved. Kevin, an altar worker, gave some insight into what happens next for

²⁶⁵ The language here is interesting. “Walking through the gates of heaven” is probably not a statement one would expect from someone who truly is “unchurched.” This again brings up the question of how “lost” some of the lost are.

the people who made decisions. First, Kevin mentioned that “it’s a powerful ministry. It’s a great feeling. It’s just a great opportunity to share the love of the Lord with those people.” He said that the follow-up is “very intentional.” Each altar worker is assigned one or two people when they come to the altar. In the side room, each person receives a pamphlet with a greeting from Lindell, the plan of salvation, some Bible verses, instructions about water baptism, and a list of some JRA ministries. Leaders go through the material with new converts, pray with them, and then invite them to a breakfast the following Sunday at 8:30 a.m. The breakfast is called C.P.R. (Celebration—celebrate with them; Prayer—pray with them; Recruit—get them involved in ministry/discipleship). All the altar workers are responsible to follow up with a phone call by Tuesday or Wednesday that week and check on them to see how they are doing, encourage them, offer prayer, and remind them to come to the breakfast. Each new convert is also encouraged to go through the New Life class, which meets every Sunday. The class includes twenty-six sessions, which take new believers through the basics of the Christian faith. As previously mentioned, new believers are also encouraged to be water baptized immediately, either that Sunday night or the next available Sunday night service.²⁶⁶ Kevin gave these closing thoughts on the follow-up ministry: “Do people fall through the cracks? Yes, they do, [but] from what I’ve seen, I think we’re doing as good as a job as we possibly can. Really, it’s up to the individual too. They have to make some effort.”

²⁶⁶ David Lindell said, “We really believe that people need to be baptized because it’s really the beginning of purposeful discipleship, really people stepping out and saying, ‘I’m willing to be associated with the body of Christ and in specific, James River.’”

The altar call speaks volumes about the mission and identity of JRA. Its frequency, the time dedicated to it each service, the respect for the moment, the loud cheering—all these aspects make it clear that the altar is the defining ritual of JRA. However, unless a member brought a “lost” friend or is an altar worker, he or she may not feel entirely involved in the identity of reaching the lost. The remainder of the chapter will explore the other opportunities people have to make reaching the lost a “worthy pursuit.”

Money

Seven building campaigns in sixteen years. Millions and millions of dollars raised. How does JRA do it? When a church has a strong identity and that identity is considered a worthy pursuit by its members, almost anything is possible. In his sermon “Investing in Your Future,” Lindell made it clear that Christians should spend their money on things that lead people to Jesus. People were tested on this teaching in May and June of 2007 with the Changing History campaign. Although many other areas of giving could be discussed (such as tithing and missions), I will use the Changing History campaign as the example for this section.

In June 2007, the people of JRA pledged \$8 million toward the Changing History campaign as a result of three straight weeks of sermons and requests for pledges for the campaign. The theme of the campaign was that “when you introduce someone to Jesus Christ, you’re changing history,” and the rhetoric of reaching the lost was the primary way of motivating people to make pledges. More specifically, the campaign was aimed at reaching lost young people. From 2004 to 2007, the attendance in the youth areas of the church nearly doubled. As a result, JRA needed more space in the early childhood,

elementary, and youth areas to “accommodate those that God has sent us.” Reaching young people has always been a primary emphasis of the church. Lindell commonly speaks about the “4-14 window,” the belief that 85 percent of people are “reached for Christ” between the ages of four and fourteen.²⁶⁷ During the campaign, Lindell also mentioned that 90 percent of people who are Christians came to know Christ before they were twenty, and he explained that there is a “window of opportunity” to reach children for Christ.

In a Changing History sermon, Lindell reminded the congregation that “the money is not ours.” The people were told that “sometimes we forget why we’re here” and that “weekly, young people are being snatched from the enemy.” The kind of messages given and the overall emphasis of the campaign are represented well by the monthly Changing History letters mailed to the congregation. Each monthly letter comes with a giving envelope for that month’s pledge. Here are some passages from those letters:

Of all the gifts we can give, there is not a greater gift than to lead someone into a relationship with Jesus Christ. The Changing History campaign is an opportunity to invest in something that will result in thousands of changed lives. (December 2007)

In the first three months of this year, 483 adults, youth and children have made decisions for Christ! . . . Just think how history is changed every week as parents and children begin new life in Jesus Christ. That is what our Changing History campaign is all about. Every time you give towards the fulfillment of your Changing History pledge you are Changing History.” (April 2008)

“Changing History” is not just a slogan or capital campaign motto, but every week in amazing ways we are seeing people come to know Jesus, and that one moment is changing the direction and course of their lives! The present building expansion is being done because we know there are tens of thousands of people who have not yet experienced the love of God and the difference His power can make in their lives. (May 2008)

²⁶⁷ There is also a “10/40 window” commonly talked about in Christian missionary circles. This “window” refers to what is considered large numbers of “unreached” people groups in Eastern world countries located between 10 and 40 degrees north of the equator.

If you haven't yet made a pledge, this is an opportunity to be a part of an incredible miracle! Your new pledge will reach the lost and would be such an encouragement to us during this part of the campaign. (June 2008)

But with all the change...one change continues to be our highest priority—it is the change that takes place every time a person gives their heart to Christ . . . That's what *Changing History* is all about—introducing people to a changed life, a better life, a new life in Christ! (September 2008)

After the first services took place in the new fourth and fifth grade auditorium in January 2008, Lindell reported to the congregation that there were nine first-time salvations that first week and that seven of them were first-time visitors. This story sent a “wow” murmur through the congregation. Giving money is simply another opportunity for people to participate in the identity of reaching the lost. Because of this identity and because it is considered a worthy pursuit by the members, JRA was able to raise the funds needed to remain a growing and vital congregation.

Material Culture

The study of material culture in religion seeks to move beyond ideas and written texts in order to find out how religious people “use things and experience spaces.”²⁶⁸ Colleen McDannell divides material culture into four categories: artifacts, landscapes, architecture, and art.²⁶⁹ Material culture at JRA is probably the most interesting and controversial topic when it comes to its role in contributing to JRA's identity of reaching the lost. But again, it will be seen that reaching the lost is the story the people of JRA tell when it comes to justifying the material culture. From leaders to laypersons, they believe

²⁶⁸ Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven: Yale University, 1995), 2. McDannell's book is an excellent study of material culture within Christianity.

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

material culture is a means to the more important end of attracting people so that they may be reached for the gospel.

Ammerman believes that “a culture includes the congregation’s history and stories of its heroes.”²⁷⁰ One of the main ways JRA communicates the story of its heroes (those who reach the lost) is through material culture. The James River Hall of Honor was perhaps the most intriguing example of material culture in the whole building. Unfortunately, the Hall of Honor was removed in order to expand the children’s area during the Changing History campaign. Nevertheless, a look back at what it was gives great insight into the heroes of JRA and how they embody reaching the lost.

The hall was dedicated to missions on one side and “The History of Written Scripture” on the other. The hall had the feel of a museum, with pictures, plaques, timelines, and pillars, and was even roped off on one side. The entrance plaque read, “James River Hall of Honor: Throughout the history of the church, and even today, a great price has been paid for the advancement of the Gospel. This memorial serves to remind us that we must pray for our missionaries and our brothers and sisters in Christ who suffer. Hebrews 13:3.”²⁷¹ There were six sections on the Missions wall. Wall one focused on persecuted Christians around the world and provided a map of the world highlighting high persecution areas. The sign above it read, “Believers all over the world carry the torch of the Gospel in the face of persecution. It is estimated that 165,000 Christians were martyred for their faith in the year 2000.” Wall two was dedicated to persecuted and martyred missionaries. Wall three was a memorial to Victor G. Plymire

²⁷⁰ Ammerman, “Culture and Identity,” 78.

²⁷¹ Hebrews 13:3 reads, “Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.”

(1881-1956), A/G missionary to Tibet. A plaque above wall four was labeled “Missionary Memorial.” Five large framed posters featured the names of deceased or martyred Assemblies of God Missionaries. Wall five bore a gold-plated plaque at the top with a quote from Ephesians 6:19-20.²⁷² Four touch screen computers built into the wall displayed world maps on which one could touch on any region of the world and a localized map would appear with the A/G missionaries from that area. One could also touch the images of the missionaries to see their biographies and pictures. A “Missionary Prayer Needs” button brought up prayer updates from the missionaries, and there was also a “Find a Missionary” index button.

One of the most talked about and controversial places on the JRA campus is the two Starbucks-serving coffee shops inside, one of which (in the atrium) is open seven days a week. The story JRA tells is that the coffee shops help create that “informal atmosphere” that is important to attracting seekers. David Lindell says that the coffee shops “help facilitate community and conversation”; they “encourage people to stay and gather around, talk, have a cup of coffee, and really engage in conversation with one another . . . right or wrong, that’s why we have them.” The weekly announcements encourage people to “arrive fifteen minutes early, grab a cup of coffee, chat with a friend, and find a seat before the service begins.” David says that having coffee shops helps to “familiarize [people] with the church and makes it not such a distant or foreign destination or location.” “A lot of people who would never come in on Sundays,” he comments, “may stop in there to get a cup of coffee.” On the church’s tour for visitors, the guide explained the reason for the “living areas” (couches, tables, chairs) around the

²⁷² Ephesians 6:19-20, “Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.”

coffee stations. He said that sometimes people are not comfortable entering into a sanctuary and therefore they may want to sit on a couch outside the doors. He said that people have accepted Christ while sitting on couches watching the screen and have then walked into the sanctuary to respond to the altar call. Hence, the cafés and the “living areas” around them are explained as tools to help reach the lost.

A great example of JRA people telling the story of reaching the lost through material culture is an anecdote told by David Lindell about his father and the fitness center. David said that the fitness center is meant to draw in members of the community “in hopes that it will familiarize them with the building and it won’t become a big church but will be reduced to a small church and a community of people.” He then told the story of a trainer from a local fitness center who came because of a friend’s request, ended up working out with John Lindell several times, and started asking him questions about Jesus and the Bible. Finally, one day he said, “I’ve heard a lot about Jesus and I’d really like to know him personally.” “He actually in the weight room committed his life to Christ,” exclaims David, “and I know that’s happened on more than one occasion. He’s now a trainer there, and his family and kids come to the church, so it has been effective.”

JRA’s rhetoric about material culture is that it is only a temporal means to an eternal end. Therefore, the pastoral staff downplays reverence for any objects or the building. David Lindell says, “I don’t really believe that there are sacred places. People are the temple of the Holy Spirit, so wherever God’s people are, it becomes holy ground. The official position of the church is that things are not sacred.” This attitude matches Sargeant’s analysis of seeker churches, saying that “the deliberate absence of religious symbols and denominational affiliation, as well as the contemporary style of music and

the informality of dress and address, suggest that seeker churches depict the sacred primarily as an internal presence.”²⁷³ David recounted the story of a woman who insisted that a wooden pulpit the church had had since its inception be in the new building. She talked to Lindell several times about making sure the pulpit was transferred to the new building. David said his dad responded by saying, “If you think that this pulpit is sacred, if this pulpit ever becomes a sacred materialistic item in this building, I’ll chop it up and burn it in my backyard.” David continued about his father:

His position is that items in the church should not be looked upon as sacred. He feels like there is a temptation for humanity to make items sacred and those [items] to take away from people focusing on God or their walk with God or prayer—things which are much more important in his mind. In his mind, none of those [sacred] things are eternal, people are eternal, so those are the things that are sacred, their walk with God and personal commitment.

Even the style of dress at JRA is seen by the people as important for reaching the lost. Ken’s comments on attire are very revealing:

I’d love to be able to dress up, but I’ll tell you what, if we all dressed up people would say, “I can’t afford to go to that church ‘cause we have to dress up. I can’t afford those kind of clothes, and if I went in my clothes it would embarrass me.” So, yes I’d love to put on a suit every Sunday. Are we doing it just right? Yes, we’re doing it just right because nobody can feel uncomfortable in our church about their dress. I think our leaders dress down to the point that maybe they put on the sloppiest stuff they got sometimes just to make people feel comfortable. What an awesome thing.

Therefore, the pastoral staff at JRA creates an identity by dressing down, and people like Ken, by not wearing dress clothes, are able to participate in the “worthy pursuit” of helping people feel welcomed and comfortable at JRA so that no one is kept from hearing the message of salvation. Repeatedly, the same pattern emerges: when something is explained as a tool for reaching the lost, people embrace it and find a way to participate.

²⁷³ Sargeant, *Seeker Churches*, 13.

Social Outreach

One of the myths Thumma exposes about megachurches is the perception that they “only care about themselves and are not seriously involved in outreach and social ministry.”²⁷⁴ JRA is certainly one of the megachurches helping to discredit that myth; the church allotted almost \$800,000 to community service and outreach in 2007.²⁷⁵ Outreach to the community includes repairing cars and homes of single moms and widows, giving away cars to those who need them, helping to fix up area schools,²⁷⁶ providing food and clothing to those in need, offering classes in financial matters, and training people to write job résumés. Outside Springfield, JRA has been involved in purchasing drilling rigs for water wells in Tanzania and Kenya, raising funds for a school to be built in Algeria, helping with Hurricane relief in Cuba, and many other service projects. Thus, JRA fits the description of Heidi Unruh and Ronald Sider in that they are “heavenly minded” or “other-worldly” Christians doing “earthly good” or “this-worldly ministry.”²⁷⁷ However, JRA’s purpose in providing these services is far more than just meeting physical needs. As Unruh and Sider comment, “The religious impulses to serve and to save are not always polarized drives.”²⁷⁸ I asked John Tortorice, who at the time was the full-time Community Services and Benevolence director but is now no longer with the church, to

²⁷⁴ Thumma, “Megachurches Today.”

²⁷⁵ This accounts for about 6% of JRA’s total budget.

²⁷⁶ This ministry, Project Partnership, in past years has included as many as 1,000 volunteers for the one-day work event. Workers go to local schools and paint, landscape, build bookcases, re-side and re-roof buildings, repair plumbing and lighting, install air conditioning units, and always renovate the teacher workrooms.

²⁷⁷ Heidi Unruh and Ronald Sider, *Saving Souls, Serving Society: Understanding the Faith Factor in Church-Based Social Ministry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 174. Unruh and Sider repeatedly mention the tension involved between social ministry and proselytizing (16ff.).

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 147. This is mainly the case in conservative Protestantism. Mainline churches are less likely to conclude evangelism in their social service programs.

explain how he and JRA distinguished between events that are intentionally evangelistic and ones that are not. His answer is revealing:

I don't know at James River if we ever distinguish; that is the number one core value of the church. Reaching the lost is the reason why the church was raised up to begin with. At James River we don't categorize or separate out that this is an evangelism event and this is a social ministry event . . . I think that our goal would be that every member in the church would be evangelizing with their lifestyle and relationships. In anything you do, ultimately the goal is to see people won to Christ. That may mean that you go in and serve first and you give first and meet a need first and build a relationship and rapport with someone, but ultimately we have to answer the question "have we done a person justice to meet their physical needs but never offer them something to meet their eternal needs?"

David Lindell and Ken were both adamant about the need for social outreach, but they also echoed Tortorice in highlighting what is most important. To them, social outreach, although "very important" (Lindell) and "a responsibility as a church" (Ken), is still only a means to a more important end. Ken said that "the spiritual aspect" of all social ministries is the "main goal." "We wouldn't be a good church if we didn't do that," he said. He believes most people's problems trace back to the absence of God in their life. In speaking about his experience in working benevolence, Ken said that one of their goals is to "testify to them and witness to them." Ken talked enthusiastically about helping people in their needs but was most enthusiastic when he exclaimed, "I got to lead a lady to the Lord over the phone in benevolence one day!" He says he has no problem attempting to get people he interacts with in benevolence into church, "'Cause we're doing them a favor if we get 'em in church, especially ours because it is a wonderful church and they'll be blessed by coming there, and maybe if they're non-Christian they'll accept the Lord there."

David Lindell calls meeting both felt needs and spiritual needs "a powerful combination" and a "very effective method of reaching out to the community." He also

believes that in all social ministries “the purpose is ultimately to share the gospel; that’s the ultimate goal and purpose.” Providing water and fixing up a school are only “vehicles to show people the light of Christ. If people don’t see the light of Christ . . . then there’s no eternal value in it.” The most important things are those which are “eternally significant and that is salvation and relationship with Jesus.”²⁷⁹ Social service is perceived as an important and necessary ministry by those at JRA, but the underlying motivation for those involved is still to reach the lost.

Special Events

For people not associated with JRA year round, their main impression of the church likely comes from one of the three events described in this section. Of the dozens of outreach events at JRA throughout the year,²⁸⁰ these are the largest, each routinely drawing well over 10,000 people. These events not only display the identity of JRA in a major way, but also allow an opportunity for people to participate in that identity and to rally together to accomplish the mission.

Easter and Christmas. These events are carried out very similarly, so I will discuss them together. As with all these events, reaching the lost starts way before the actual event. Each year for Easter, prayer cards are passed out to the entire congregation.

²⁷⁹ David does, however, seem sincere in his desire to help people physically—what Unruh and Sider would call “the intersection of witness and compassion” (*Saving Souls*, 22). He says, “Christians should be willing to reach out to those around them in more ways than just trying to save them or providing some sort of eternal fire insurance so they don’t go to hell—though that’s true and people should realize eternity is a very real fact to life—but we should also treat them as people and restore people’s dignity. We care about people’s dignity . . . because Jesus cares about their dignity.”

²⁸⁰ Others would include events such as the “October 31st Party,” described as an outreach where “many, many, many people who don’t know Jesus” will come (Gibbons). The youth program also does several major outreaches throughout the year, often reporting as much as 150 decisions for Christ for a single event. They also participate in missions trips, traveling teams, street-witnessing, and other outreaches.

Side one of the card says, “I will commit to pray for the salvation of:” and then five blanks follow. Side two says,

As God enables me, I commit:

1. To pray each day from now until Easter for the salvation of those listed on the front of this card
2. To fast one meal each day during the week of April 2nd
3. To personally invite each person on the front of this card to one of our Easter services.

Two cards are filled out, one for the member to keep and the other to put in the offering. The collected cards are redistributed among the congregation in subsequent weeks to be prayed for at the prayer meetings. The pastoral staff also claimed in 2007 to have prayed through all the names on the cards. After over one hundred people “committed their life to Christ” on Easter 2007, credit was given to the weeks of praying over the prayer cards by the congregation. This activity invites the people of the congregation to participate in the identity of the congregation. Another way this is accomplished is through the yard signs that the church gives out for people to put in their front yards to announce major events like the Easter outreach. People are encouraged to put the signs up “even if the postman is the only one to see it.” Many signs can be seen throughout the Ozarks during these times of the year.

As one can imagine, Easter and Christmas are massive productions at JRA. Each event has a theme, such as “True Love” for Easter 2008 or “A Christmas to Remember.” Both outreaches feature a large orchestra, choreographed dancing, many song “specials,” videos, and more. The Christmas productions usually run for at least three nights in mid-December, sometimes more. But for people at JRA, the most significant part of each event is, of course, the end.

A common tool all major outreaches use is the video testimony. These testimonies are always used right before the altar call. Featuring stories of individuals or families whose lives were changed by committing their lives to Jesus at JRA, each video is a dramatic “reenactment” of a life story. Easter 2008 featured the story of a single mom who was battling depression and was in a bad cycle of relationships. The video, titled “Looking for True Love,” told the story of how she was invited to JRA, responded to an altar call, and now has her life together and has a stronger relationship with her kids. As a neighbor interviewed on the video said, “She’s happy, she’s bubbly, she’s at peace.” After the video, the normal altar call routine was followed and dozens of people responded to pack the altar. The Christmas 2007 video told the story of a violent drinker who had been through three marriages, had spent time in prison, and was facing an additional ten years in prison. He remarried, and his wife and daughter began coming to JRA. After four years of attending, he finally came to a service, accepted Jesus, and was baptized that night. The wife said in the video that “God transformed my husband.”

Conversion Narratives. The significance of these videos, used throughout the year at different services, merits discussion. Conversion narratives have always been central to evangelicalism.²⁸¹ Robert Wuthnow says that a conversion narrative “tells of life before, when things were bad, and life after, when things were better . . . the essential logic is binary . . . Whatever was wrong before the conversion is healed by the conversion, and the more one casts the first phase as a time of darkness and despair, the more the second phase appears as a time of illumination and rejoicing.”²⁸² Ammerman

²⁸¹ See D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative: Spiritual Autobiography in Early Modern England* (New York: Oxford University, 2005).

²⁸² Wuthnow, *American Mythos*, 96.

speaks of “stories that transmit the lore of the group” and how “the theology of a congregation is best understood as its own telling of sacred stories.”²⁸³ Thus, these videos speak volumes about how JRA understands salvation. The videos follow the binary logic that Wuthnow mentions. The beginning is often in black and white with dark music and scenes of isolation—often reenactments of drug use or drinking. The second half is always bright, has happy music, and the person is seen with their kids and family all happy and together.

I Love America. Few churches in the country can claim to have an event as large as JRA’s Independence Day celebration, “I Love America” (ILA). What started as a church picnic in 1997 with 13,000 people, has grown to an event that takes place on 250 acres of land and has drawn as much as 115,000 people in recent years. Lasting from 11 a.m. until about midnight, the event features a 40-by-80-foot professional stage, 30-by-60-foot “living” American flag that the choir stands in, two massive screens, skydivers, air shows, dozens of kids’ games and inflatables, dozens of vendors, live bands, merchandise, advertisements, and political speeches by people like the governor of Missouri. The night events are the biggest, featuring a paid professional orchestra. Last year the event made its debut on GodTV. No other event speaks more about JRA’s identity and the importance of its being a worthy pursuit. The weeks leading up to the event each year have a similar routine, and from beginning to end the message is always the same: the purpose of the event is to share the gospel.

The Volunteer Sermon. Five or six weeks before the event, the ILA push for volunteers begins. It takes nearly 3,000 volunteers to pull off the event. What would

²⁸³ Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, 61.

motivate this many people to work on a holiday and as well as all the weeks preparing leading up to it? The opportunity to be a part of reaching the lost. Lindell is always very clear on this to members; they were told in 2008 that “the sermon is not at 8:00 [the night of ILA], but the sermon starts weeks before the gates ever open . . . The sermon is preached as the people drive the stake posts into the ground. The sermon is preached when they pull out of the parking lot and someone waves to them.” He went on to name more and more volunteer positions. He said that when the preaching team gives the gospel that night, what they are really doing is “closing out the sermon that has been preached for weeks.” Lindell told the congregation that it is not just the preacher who is credited with the souls that are saved. In 2007, Lindell said that volunteering is “a chance to be a part of what Jesus is about, seeking and saving the lost.” The people are told that ILA is an opportunity to preach the gospel to one in every three people of the greater Springfield area. Lindell called this “a historic opportunity from the Lord.”

Promotional Materials. Each ILA has a theme. In 2007 it was “It is fitting to celebrate . . . when the lost are found,” or the short name “Found.” The theme came from the three parables in Luke 15. The 2008 theme was “This is *real* love” (1 John 4:10). Each year t-shirts can be purchased with that year’s theme, and people are encouraged to wear them out in public (which they do). Lindell called the t-shirts a “walking billboard” and told the congregation that when people ask them about it, they can invite them to ILA. Bracelets are also handed out as well as yard signs. Commercials are played on television and radio, and full-page ads appear in the local newspaper. The event also gets press coverage before and after the event in the newspaper and on the local television

networks. ILA has its own website that provides a countdown clock as well as a way to send a “friend e-vite.”²⁸⁴

Keeping Focused. In the weeks leading up to ILA, the leadership focuses heavily on preparing people for the event. One of the primary tasks of the leadership seems to keep people focused and motivated with regard to the purpose of the event. Dozens of times before the event, Lindell asks the congregation, “What’s the purpose of the event?” and the congregation responds in unison, “To share the gospel.” “We are there for one purpose and one purpose only” said Lindell in 2007, and everyone responded, “To share the gospel.” Lindell told the congregation that “It’s about more than fireworks . . . the fireworks is simply a means, it gathers people together to do the most important thing a church can do which is [in unison] ‘to share the gospel.’” The congregation is asked to pray everyday for three areas: weather, souls, and safety. Postcards are sent out to each volunteer to remind them of his or her work area. The bottom of the postcard reads, “ILA: Why? To share the Gospel.” A bulletin is given to each person the five Sundays leading up to ILA, showing what areas are still in need of volunteers. The bulletins feature messages from John and Debbie Lindell, like “It’s a great opportunity to REACH THE LOST” or “It’s so exciting to see people step up and say, ‘Count me in! I want to bring joy to God by helping to reach out to those who are lost so they might be found.’” The message a few weeks before ILA said this,

On July 4th we’ll **share the Gospel**...every act of kindness—whether it’s helping a child on a ride, picking up trash on the field, parking cars or praying with people at the altar—will be preaching a message of God’s love for people. And when they respond by opening their hearts to the Gospel...**heaven celebrates**. If you

²⁸⁴ <http://www.iloveamerica.ws/>. The site features several different things, including a history of the event.

haven't signed up to serve at ILA, then do it today and get ready to **“celebrate”** with the angels in heaven!

To JRA's credit, they are upfront about the purpose of the event. Lindell gives people statements like this one constantly: “When people ask you, ‘Why is the church shooting off fireworks?’ tell them ‘to share the gospel.’” Lindell always says, “We’re unapologetic about that.” Interviews in the local newspapers and on the news always quote pastors emphasizing that the purpose of the event is the share the gospel. Thus, to some extent, JRA avoids what Heidi Unruh and Ronald Sider call “heteroglossic discourse,” in which what a church says within its walls about an event is different from how they advertise it to the public.²⁸⁵ However, it is likely true that many people who come are not aware of what JRA considers the main purpose of the event. The commercials, ads, and radio spots do not mention “preaching” or “gospel presentation.” The name *I Love America* certainly sounds more like a celebration of America than a celebration of the gospel.

The Volunteer Rally. The volunteer rally the Sunday night before July 4 is the last chance for leadership to get people connected to the vision of ILA. Thousands of volunteers gather first for a corporate time of worship and prayer for the event. The purpose of the night, in Lindell's words, is to “make sure we understand the theology behind what we’re doing.” Much of that theology, not surprisingly, contains apocalyptic significance. Lindell reminded people both in 2007 and in 2008 that “for some people this could be their last ILA” (2007) and “for some people, this is their last chance to hear the gospel” (2008). The mood is both one of anticipation as well as seriousness. Lindell told the people that there is “so much at stake” and “this is life or death for people.”

²⁸⁵ Unruh and Sider, *Saving Souls*, 188-92.

Lindell not only uses imminence (as well as urgency) but also dualism to rally the people. He told the volunteers that for many people coming to ILA, “The god of this world has blinded their hearts and minds.” The volunteers are reminded that they need to be “prayed up and ready to go” and are encouraged that “Heaven sees what you do.” They are “ambassadors to the lost.” In 2008, during a rough time for the economy, Lindell prepared the volunteers for how to answer anyone who might ask why the church is spending all this money with all the people in need right now. Lindell responded, “Let me tell you, it’s not a waste of money . . . We have a responsibility to preach the gospel to the community.” He stated that this is the primary mission of the church and “we are not a benevolence agency.” The congregation prays together for ILA, led by pastors who pray for “the greatest harvest of souls we’ve ever seen before.” People are then dismissed to their volunteer areas to prepare.

The Event. Despite all the events taking place at ILA, the main event for the people of JRA (and the focus of this section) is the preaching. All games shut down, people are asked to put down their tents, and the message of the gospel is heard loud and clear across the field and seen on the big screens. As with most big events such as Christmas and Easter, all three members of the preaching team preach a segment of the message. After the second member preaches, the video testimony is shown, often retelling a story of someone who was saved at a previous ILA. The stage is then set for the third member (either Lindell or Gibbons) and the altar call. Soon the designated walking rows of the field become aisles, and the space in front of the massive stage is transformed into an altar. In many ways the ILA altar call is like all the rest of altar calls at JRA; the pastors use the same types of pleas and a similar order of events. What sets

the ILA altar call apart is its size and scope and unusual *amount* of pleading that takes place. In 2007, Lindell’s altar call—from the time he began asking people to come forward—lasted over twenty minutes. Here are excerpts (in order) from those twenty minutes:

[The testimony video] highlights the difference Jesus can make . . . She came forward . . . Jesus Christ set her free from that depression and anger . . . She stepped out, she came forward . . . God miraculously brought peace and joy into her heart . . . Jesus Christ can do the same thing in your life tonight . . . You may have everything this world has to offer and yet you find yourself asking “Is this all there is to life? Is this all that life’s about?” . . . You can have a new start in life, a new heart, but it all begins with you making a decision . . . [Talks about the power of God to help you in your marriage, as a parent; a power that will change the history and course of your life] . . . Where are you going to spend eternity? . . . Right now you feel a tug on your heart, that’s the Lord calling you to Him . . . You can leave this place right with the Lord, having His peace, having His joy . . . It’s not about joining James River Assembly . . . Come down the aisles . . . You step out and come . . . The reason why we do ILA is because we want to introduce people to what Jesus Christ can do in their life . . . You come right now . . . You’re struggling with addiction—He’ll set you free . . . People are coming right now, you come . . . You can leave here a different person—totally set free . . . You say “Why do I have to come?” It’s never reality until you act on it . . . We’re simply sharing with you the power of Jesus Christ . . . [It has been about 10 minutes now] . . . He’s gonna work a miracle in your life . . . That’s what this whole event is all about [the power of Jesus Christ in your life] . . . [Audience encouraged to give them a round of applause. As they come, people go over to the tent and pray with an altar worker] . . . People are still coming, this is amazing . . . The fireworks you’re gonna see in the sky aren’t anything compared to the fireworks you’re gonna feel in your heart . . . [Worship team begins to sing “I need you Jesus, to come to my rescue”] . . . Come . . . You come . . . You step out and come . . . Come on down . . . This is so exciting, people are still coming—you come . . . Husbands turn to your wives and say ““Let’s go” . . . It’s not too late . . . [Now about 20 minutes into asking people to come] . . . The most amazing thing you can do in your life . . . You’ll leave different than you came . . . Just c’mon down . . . You can come as a family . . . This is awesome, amazing, because God is going to work a miracle in their life . . . They’re still coming . . . This is the whole purpose we do this event: to give people an opportunity to experience His power, His freedom in your life . . . You just come . . . Step out and come . . . It’s not too late to come . . . We want everyone to come who can come because this is the most important thing we can do . . . Don’t leave tonight without experiencing Him in your life . . . [Explains the meaning of the “Found” t-shirts: “there is a celebration when you are found”] . . . Think of the celebration in heaven that is happening . . . We’re taking so much time because we don’t want one person to

leave who does not know Jesus without giving them an opportunity to accept Him . . . [Closes time by praying for all who have come forward] . . . I love America, but I love Jesus even more!

I estimated (I lost count eventually) that a version of the word “come” was used over 200 times during the twenty minutes.

The Results. ILA is one of the biggest Fourth of July events in the country.

Furthermore, its fireworks show is considered one of the best in the country. Yet, the only things about ILA that a person will hear in a JRA service is how many people were reached and how God divinely orchestrated events and weather. In 2007, the church reported that there were 159 decisions for Christ at ILA, a number greeted with thunderous applause from the congregation. Lindell talked about how it was amazing to look around and think, “a miracle is happening out on that field.” A highlight video from ILA was shown, but the only texts in the video were these three phrases: “Share the gospel,” “159 Salvations,” “History Changed.” In 2008, 119 people were saved at ILA. Here is a summary of the event from Lindell’s blog:²⁸⁶

July 8th, 2008

What a great day the Lord gave us at ILA! Our goal was to share the Gospel and, to that end, we had 119 people come forward and make decisions for Christ! This year, the event was carried live on GodTV and there is no telling how many lives were touched by the broadcast. One man by the name of Lou from Buffalo, New York called the church on Sunday morning to say thanks for airing ILA on GodTV. He had fallen away from the Lord and he and his wife were having problems. He watched the program and said he fell to his knees crying like a baby. He rededicated his life to Christ and is going back to church! He couldn’t say thank you enough.

Once again the Lord helped us with the weather. Two days before the event, the weather forecast was for 3-5 inches of rain on July 4th with a front predicted to stall over Springfield. The forecasters were not only calling for rain, but some had predicted we would be totally rained out. Instead we enjoyed partly sunny skies,

²⁸⁶ Lindell, “My blogs,” <http://www.johnlindell.net/> (accessed September 18, 2008).

temperatures around 78 degrees and a nice breeze from the north. When it was time for the fireworks the skies were totally clear. God demonstrated His power, the fact that He answers prayer, and people throughout the area are still talking about it!

In the weeks leading up to the ILA outreach there was a special grace that was evident in all of the preparations. While we have always enjoyed a supernatural unity at JRA, I cannot remember a time when there has been a greater sense of unity and purpose than we have experienced during these last several weeks.

My heart is filled with thanksgiving to the Lord as I think of the hundreds of volunteers who gave of their time and so effectively demonstrated the kindness and love of our God and Savior to those who came out for the celebration. Yesterday I received the following email regarding the love that was demonstrated by the JRA people who were serving at the event.

“We just wanted to express how much we appreciate the hard work and commitment that JRA puts forth in hosting the I Love America event. We had an absolutely fantastic time this year. The fireworks display was nothing like we have ever seen. The orchestra, choir, and musicians were wonderful. The smiling faces of people greeting everyone on the way in to the event was great, during the event the people who were asking if they could dispose of any of our trash were so kind. The people of JRA just shined. Only a love for the Lord can bring forth that type of service and commitment! Thanks again for the wonderful day!”

It blows my mind after all we have just experienced to know that...

“The best is yet to come!”

A key concept mentioned in the blog report is the weather. The story of weather is important for understanding the way people at JRA view God’s activity and how that relates to reaching the lost. As mentioned, members are encouraged to pray for the weather for ILA, and time is set aside during the Wednesday night prayer meetings to do so. The Sunday before the 2007 ILA as well as other times, Lindell showed the radar from the past two ILA’s on the screens at the church. Lindell told the story of how God divinely changed the weather for the outreach. He said that it was pouring down rain that morning, and the forecasters were predicting it to pour all day long. When asked by a reporter at the outreach site if he was going to cancel the event, he responded that the

church had prayed for the weather and that the skies were going to open up, the clouds would clear, and a beautiful, sunny day would break forth. Lindell then showed on the screen the radar from that day and how the clouds miraculously disappeared, dissolving right over Springfield in the early afternoon. He commented that even television and radio reporters spoke of what a miracle it was that the rain disappeared that day. He is always quick mention that the *Springfield News-Leader* headline from after the 2006 ILA read “Glorious Fourth: Prayers Answered for ILA.”

After the 2007 ILA, he gave another weather testimony. Lindell showed on the screen the bands of storms to the north and south converging on Springfield. Then, the storms dissolve. “It’s as if God said to the storms, ‘You can go this far and none further.’” The article in the *Springfield News-Leader* the day after ILA 2007 mentioned the threatening clouds and then said:

But John Lindell, pastor of the Ozark church, was confident. In his palm was a BlackBerry with a satellite photo showing rain clouds bypassing Springfield. “Isn’t that amazing?” he said. “It’s not because we’re God’s favorite, but if we pray, he helps us.” It’s been a long-standing tradition that members of the church pray for no rain on the holiday so I Love America celebrations will go smoothly. This year, the church had been praying for good weather since May. At noon Wednesday [July 4], they prayed again, Lindell said.²⁸⁷

Before the 2008 ILA, the radar from 2007 and 2006 was again shown. As always, there was loud cheering in response to these radar images being shown. The woman in front of me whispered, “Awesome.” At the Sunday service after ILA 2008, Lindell spoke about the “miraculous power of God on display” with regard to the weather. He made it clear, “It’s not as much about us praying as much as it is about a God who answers prayer.”

²⁸⁷ *Springfield News-Leader*, July 5, 2007.

Why is it important to share all these stories about the weather? Gibbons answered this question at the volunteer rally in 2008 and explained why the people should continue to pray for the weather: “Because people come to know Jesus as Lord and Savior.” Thus, the weather stories confirm to the people at JRA that God answers the prayers of his people because he is concerned about reaching the lost. The argument for this section on ILA—and for this whole chapter—is not that JRA is growing and vital because it is reaching the lost and therefore adding new believers. The argument is that the identity of reaching the lost, when it becomes a worthy pursuit, is a unifying concept for the congregation and therefore adds to the vitality of the church. The point is not to decide if the true purpose of ILA is *really* to reach the lost. Rather, the importance is how the identity of reaching the lost rallies the congregation together to pull off such a massive event. ILA may not add many new believers to the church, but it certainly strengthens the church. As I heard a woman near me say to the person next to her in the Sunday service after the 2007 ILA, “Doesn’t the church just feel, like, closer?” By praying, volunteering, wearing t-shirts, and contributing in other ways during ILA, people are able to participate in the identity of JRA, which they clearly regard as a worthy pursuit.

Conclusion

According to Thumma and others, the first required element for a church to develop committed members and grow is “that they offer a clear, well-defined identity.” This chapter reveals that JRA’s identity of reaching the lost is both clear and well defined in the things they do. I have also pointed out places where this identity becomes “a

worthy pursuit” for the congregants, which Thumma and others also believe must happen for a church to grow. I would like to offer some final examples briefly in conclusion.

A Worthy Pursuit. If the identity of a church or megachurch is only told as its story but does not become a worthy pursuit for the congregation, then the identity will not flourish and neither will the church. A vital church realizes that the people must be invited to participate in the identity and must be a part of the story. As Thumma says, people are “looking for a faith that can make a difference in their lives, give them a purpose, and provide them with a place to be of service to humanity.”²⁸⁸

Ken’s faith journey is a wonderful example of the importance of establishing an identity with a potential church attendee and then offering him or her a worthy pursuit. The former Southern Baptist came to JRA eight years ago, devastated by divorce and “looking for healing because I was really hurt and broken.” He recalled his first visit with warmth:

I felt the Holy Spirit there so strongly [begins to weep], and I hadn’t felt that at any other church in my life. I felt the spirit so strongly that I didn’t want to leave after the service was over. I walked out to my car, but I was so hungry for that spirit that I turned around and walked back into that sanctuary just to stand there, to feel the presence of the Holy Spirit; it felt so good. I’d never felt that in any other church ever.

Ken eventually embraced the reaching the lost identity of JRA, and it became the worthy pursuit in his life that makes him a committed member. He said he “sold out to the Lord” and “gave it all to him one night.” He claimed that “for a lot of my life I didn’t have the boldness to talk about the Lord outside of church . . . I lacked boldness in sharing the gospel with others.” But when Ken told the Lord he would “sell out completely” to Him, he knew the Lord was calling him to “ministries” as he called it. Eventually Ken, as

²⁸⁸ Thumma, “Exploring the Megachurch.”

mentioned in chapter two, experienced the baptism in the Holy Spirit. Over time, this once timid man became a bold proclaimer of the gospel:

Through the baptism in the Holy Spirit and just knowing my place in life was to minister and spread the gospel, I just got more bold. Now I can hardly not do that [share the gospel]. That's about all I think about, all I want to do. If I have a conversation with someone or meet somebody new they're about to have to hear some testimony 'cause that's just the way it is with me. But I wasn't always that bold or that confident, but now I got it.

Ken told several stories of sharing the gospel with people in various places, from airports to people in Nicaragua, where he often visits to minister. By embracing the identity of JRA as a worthy pursuit, Ken is a prime example of why vital churches retain committed people and continue to grow.

This commitment to the identity of JRA can be found in my other interviews as well. The following comments give a good example of how members of JRA see this identity in different areas of the church and credit the identity with helping the church succeed. Kevin said,

Honestly, the bottom line of James River is preaching the gospel. And whatever venue that takes, whether it's the children's ministry, youth ministry, through I Love America, through Project Partnership where they're fixing up schools, to camps, children's ministries, whatever. The bottom line is that they want people to get saved and that's what our mission is all about. It's awesome.

Nick managed to touch on almost every topic discussed in this chapter:

The mission of the church is obviously to reach the lost. And we constantly are pouring that into the congregation, especially with our I Love America campaign. Because originally the church wanted to do a fireworks show and display to reach the lost, and it's now become something the state of Missouri looks forward to every year. It's an example of how God has really blessed the efforts of the church and the desire of the hearts of the leadership staff in reaching the lost. We have multiple ministries that the church does like the Christmas concert and the Easter program and the adopt-a-block ministry. The whole benevolence department in the church is a way that the church is able to minister to locally the people of Springfield and the other cities. And obviously we do missions projects to help missionaries every year. The point is that we need to be helping these

missionaries. Because the point is God has called us to reach the lost. That's the great commission, to go out into the world. And the church has just been amazing with how much money people are willing to put out there to help missionaries and to help out the ministries. And the volunteers, you know, that pour in to help, not getting paid, to reach the lost and to be a part of what God is doing in the area. The church has been very, very, very proactive in the local area. And Pastor John has said numerous times that Springfield, the city of Springfield, has given them so much favor—well, the Lord has given the church so much favor in Springfield. We've gotten to the point where now the news stations come to the church when there's a disaster or when there's a disaster in the county; the church is always lending a hand whether it's sending people down there or providing money. So, the heart of the church has always been to minister to people in need. And the favor we've received through the years with the city of Springfield and the surrounding cities has just been amazing. And that's all do in part to the heart of the church.

Why “Reaching the Lost” Works. A final question is, in order to be a vital church, does it matter what the identity is? The answer is yes. Miller is probably right when he says, “Converts are going to maintain loyalty to institutions that rigorously pursue the task of life transformation . . . and will have only marginal loyalty, if any, to religious institutions pursuing other agendas, such as social problems in other parts of the world.”²⁸⁹ Ammerman says that “we join groups that hold out the promise of self-transformation and nurture that multiply our individual efforts at influence in the world.”²⁹⁰ Thus, certain identities, primarily those that offer transformation, are more likely to contribute to vitality than others are. This identity also must become an obligation of the people and rally them together. As Wuthnow says, “Communities of obligation pose expectations to which individuals voluntarily submit, and which over time become such a part of individuals’ identities that they are, in a sense, binding.”²⁹¹ This chapter contends that the identity of reaching the lost binds people together at JRA

²⁸⁹ Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, 79.

²⁹⁰ Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, 354.

²⁹¹ Wuthnow, *American Mythos*, 215.

for a sole mission and purpose. Whether through the weekly altar call, money, material culture, social outreach, or special events, people find avenues to support and identify with the core vision of the church. And in case they forget, they are faced with a plaque above every door as they leave the sanctuary: “You are now entering the mission field.”

CONCLUSION

The previous chapters have discussed three primary reasons for growth and vitality at James River Assembly, a megachurch in the Ozarks. The first reason is the sense of excitement at JRA; the church is perceived as a place where the future is promising and “the best is yet to come.” It is exciting also because one can encounter the supernatural. People touch and are touched by the sacred through worship, healing, and financial provision. The second reason for the church’s growth is JRA’s apocalyptic worldview. The tenets of dualism, pessimism, vindication, and imminence are central to JRA’s way of doing church, and this worldview contributes to vitality because of the “intense otherworldliness” it creates as well as the demands and sacrifice that it involves. Finally, JRA’s strong sense of identity, reaching the lost, contributes to the church’s strength. This identity creates vitality not only because it presents a unified vision of the church, but also because the people of JRA accept it as a worthy pursuit for their lives. Combined, these three reasons create a plausible case for why JRA has experienced vitality as a church. They are by no means the only or even the best three reasons, but the chapters have presented evidence that they certainly deserve consideration in the debate concerning religious vitality.

In closing, I would like to offer two more reasons why JRA is thriving, both of which are implied in the preceding chapters. Each reason has to do with the way JRA balances inevitable tensions that are at work within the congregation. First, JRA has been able to balance the classic tenets of Pentecostalism—Spirit baptism, divine healing, experiential worship, imminence—while still adopting new “relevant” forms of church. In his work on early Pentecostals, Grant Wacker claims that the genius of the Pentecostal

movement was “its ability to hold two seemingly incompatible impulses in productive tension,” namely the primitive and the pragmatic.²⁹² These impulses worked together to secure the movement’s success, partly because they helped early Pentecostals find “ways to weave heavenly aspirations with everyday realities.”²⁹³ As Sargeant says, churches “embody, at times paradoxically, the new and the old, the innovative and the traditional.”²⁹⁴ I believe balancing these tensions has been critical to JRA’s success and will continue to be. JRA has maintained the “otherworldliness” and supernatural elements that has made Pentecostalism so successful while at the same time updating these forms of religion in a way that is appealing to modern society. Undoubtedly pragmatic in its use of modern methods to spread its message, JRA remains primitive in the many elements of the content of the message. As Wacker says, “The otherworldly legitimates the thisworldly.”²⁹⁵

Margaret Poloma has criticized the A/G for downplaying “distinctively Pentecostal beliefs and practices in order to be accepted by the evangelical world.”²⁹⁶ But while JRA does not “fly the A/G flag,” as Lindell said, I believe it has maintained the important beliefs and practices that characterize the Pentecostal movement. The form has changed, but Poloma’s assessment of the charisma of the A/G’s being “domesticated” and “tamed” does not seem to apply to JRA.²⁹⁷ Yes, many other A/G churches would be

²⁹² Wacker, *Heaven Below*, 10.

²⁹³ Ibid., 15.

²⁹⁴ Sargeant, *Seeker Churches*, 169.

²⁹⁵ Wacker, *Heaven Below*, 268.

²⁹⁶ Poloma, *The Assemblies of God*, 242.

²⁹⁷ Ibid., 94.

more adamant about their A/G positions and doctrines and may champion the name A/G, but in practice, many of them are less distinctively Pentecostal than JRA. For example, a member of another prominent A/G church in Springfield said that his pastor began preaching through the book of Revelation, but stopped after the letters to the seven churches at the end of chapter 3. When asked why, the pastor claimed he was too nervous to preach the “confusing” and more otherworldly passages of the rest of the book. Such an attitude would not be the case for early Pentecostals and certainly is not the case at JRA. Thus, although JRA may not publicly express itself as Pentecostal or A/G (and in fact may downplay it), in action they are unquestionably Pentecostal, albeit in a new way. Furthermore, to relate to modern culture, JRA may deemphasize denomination and tradition more as a way to keep Pentecostalism alive rather than bury it completely. Other A/G or Pentecostal churches may accuse JRA of “selling out,” but JRA is growing while most of those churches have plateaued.

The second tension JRA has balanced well is its message of this-worldly fulfillment, or the therapeutic sensibilities of the Gospel, combined with demands that require sacrifice, time, and commitment. By maintaining both of these elements, JRA is able to benefit both the individual on a personal level and the larger community. Wuthnow says there is a “*both-and*” quality to the individual—a delicate balance between the autonomous individual who pursues individual happiness and the responsible individual who contributes to the common good . . . Thus a balance between egoism and altruism, between self-fulfillment and caring for others.”²⁹⁸ Both of these elements are essential for the growth and good of a congregation. The preceding chapters give plenty

²⁹⁸ Wuthnow, *American Mythos*, 41-42.

of evidence that JRA caters to both needs. Certainly, critiques of individualism or self-serving redemptionism regarding JRA are warranted and should be carefully considered.²⁹⁹ Nevertheless, JRA has found a moderate position between these two personal needs.

In addition to showing why JRA has grown and why it may continue to grow, what can be learned from this study? First, it says much about the specific region of the Ozarks. Certainly, JRA's paradigm of church will not work everywhere, but this study speaks volumes about a significant portion of people in the Ozarks region, especially pertaining to their religious beliefs. Second, this study gives insight into American Religion and society in general. As Thumma says, the study of megachurches "has much to say about both the spiritual needs and cultural realities of a significant segment of American society."³⁰⁰

Third, this work contains theoretical implications. I have found several theories useful—strictness theory, economic market theory, rational choice theory, and subcultural identity theory, to name a few. But, more than proving or disproving theories of vitality, this project demonstrates that American Religion is complex and multifaceted. For example, these seemingly paradoxical reasons all contribute to vitality at JRA: extreme optimism and extreme pessimism; excitement and strictness; otherworldliness and this-worldly fulfillment; a sense of doom and a sense of hope; being "under attack" from the secular world and using secular means to attract people. Therefore, it is too presumptuous for me or anyone to claim to have *the* explanation for the vitality of

²⁹⁹ Such critiques are common in works relating to evangelicalism. Both Christian Smith (*American Evangelicalism*) and Kimon Sargeant (*Seeker Churches*) offer critiques of this sort.

³⁰⁰ Thumma, "The Kingdom, The Power, and The Glory," 14.

American Religion and more specifically conservative Protestantism. To some extent, I have claimed that the answer is all of the theories and the answer is none of them. More than anything, my hope is that this project can contribute to the ongoing discussions of congregational vitality.

Lastly, this project has much to say about the religious traditions and movements it is associated with. I agree with Thumma that one of the primary reasons for the rise of megachurches is that they respond to the needs of modern Americans. He claims that “the genius of megachurches” is “their ability to read and adapt to the changing patterns and cultural needs of contemporary society.”³⁰¹ This ability to change, as discussed in chapter two, has been essential to JRA’s growth. While adapting to the needs of society concerns some, I see it primarily as a positive development and even as necessary for continued vitality.³⁰² At a time when the A/G has plateaued and the fellowship is concerned about its vitality, an in-depth look into one of its most vital congregations is extremely valuable. Declining churches or movements may be able to learn from JRA’s ability to remain committed to essential Pentecostal doctrines like apocalypticism (chapter three) and evangelism (chapter four) and combine them with the modern appeal of optimism and personal fulfillment (chapter three). And if JRA continues to incorporate the elements of vitality stated in the previous chapters, then perhaps it is true that “the best is yet to come.”

³⁰¹ Thumma and Travis, *Beyond Megachurch Myths*, 183.

³⁰² Sargeant is one example of those who seem concerned. Thumma would be closer to my position.

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APPENDIX

INTERVIEW GUIDES

Several different questionnaires were used for interviews over the course of this research. Questionnaire A, developed specifically for this project, was the primary questionnaire used. Questionnaire B, used for two interviews (Ken, David Lindell), was created and used by my seminar class at Missouri State University in the Spring of 2007. Questionnaire C was developed specifically for my interviews with the pastoral staff and used some questions from Questionnaire A. Every interview varied considerably depending on the responses of the interviewee; the questionnaires acted more as guides than rigid outlines. Therefore, not all questions listed under each questionnaire were used in every interview.

Questionnaire A

I. Introductory Questions.

1. Do you work? If yes: what do you do for a living?
2. Where do you currently live?
3. How long does it take for you to travel from home to the church?
4. How long have you attended JRA?
5. Are you a member?

II. Spiritual Biography and Beliefs.

1. Tell me about your life growing up. Did you have a religious family? Did you attend church?
2. What does it mean to become a Christian? To be saved?
3. Do you think becoming a Christian is a one-time decision or is it more a gradual process?
4. Have you ever been “saved”? If yes: has it changed your life at all?
5. In the last five years, have you ever talked to someone about your faith? If yes: did you try to persuade them to become a Christian?
6. Are you spirit-filled (define)? If yes: When did you receive the baptism? What does spirit baptism mean to you/your life?
7. Do you read the Bible? How often?

8. What are your beliefs about the Bible (prompts: perfectly true, some error, legend)?
9. Do you pray? How often? What kind of things do you pray for?
10. How do you pray? (Prompts: place, content, posture, silent/out loud).
11. What does the phrase “relationship with God” mean to you?
12. Do you consider God to be involved in your everyday life? How?
13. Have you ever felt God leading you to do something? Have you ever heard the voice of God?
14. What do you think about the Second Coming of Christ?
15. Are things getting better or worse in the world?
16. Anything else you would like to tell me about your relationship with God?

III. Coming to JRA.

1. How and when did you hear about JRA? What about it attracted you?
2. What was the congregation like back when you first started to attend here?
3. How have things changed since then? How do you feel about the changes?
4. What is your favorite thing about the church?
5. What do you dislike about JRA? What areas do you think need improvement?
6. How do you feel about the size of JRA?
7. What are your feelings on the way JRA is run, i.e., the leadership style of the pastors and staff?

IV. Church Involvement.

1. What activities or ministries are you involved in at JRA?
2. How many hours a week do you spend at the church or in church activities?
3. What role does JRA play in your life? The life of your family?
4. How many family members are involved at JRA?
5. Are you involved in a life group? What led you to join one?
6. Have you ever been to I Love America? How did you feel about it?

V. The Mission of the Church.

1. How would you describe JRA’s mission?
2. Can you name any of the seven core values of JRA?
3. (Give stats about growth). Why do you think JRA has grown so much?

VI. Church Services.

1. What is the most important part of the service in your opinion? Which part is most meaningful to you?
2. What is the least important part of the service?

A. Music/Worship:

1. How do you feel about the music at JRA?
2. Do you think the worship time is too short, too long, or just right?
3. Do you have a favorite song to sing? A song that means a lot to you personally?
4. How has the worship changed over time?

B. Prayer time at Front:

1. Do you ever go up for prayer during the worship? If so, what have you requested prayer for?

C. Praise Reports/Congregational prayer:

1. Do you ever fill out prayer request cards? For what kinds of things? Have they been answered?
2. Has someone from the church ever contacted you about your request?
3. Do you fill out praise report cards? For what?

D. Financial Praise Reports/Offering:

1. What do think about the practice of tithing (define tithing)?
2. Do you financially participate in the building campaigns? How did you decide what to give?
3. How do you feel when Pastor John or someone else talks about money/giving from the pulpit?

E. Preaching:

1. What do you think about the preaching at JRA?
2. Is there anything you ever disagree with?

F. Altar Call:

1. Have you ever responded to an altar call?
2. How do you feel when you watch people go forward to receive Christ?
3. Is there anything you would like to change about this part of the service?
4. Is there anything you would like to go back to or talk more about?

VII. Basic Demographics.

1. Age: What is your age?
2. Gender: Record gender on the tape.

3. Race/Ethnicity: What racial or ethnic group(s) do you consider yourself a part of?
4. Marital Status: What is your marital status (Married, living with a partner, widowed, divorced, single)?
5. Do you have any children? If yes: How many? How many live at home?
6. Education: What is the highest level of education you have obtained?
7. What is your political party affiliation?
8. What is your approximate household income?

Questionnaire B

I. Introductory Questions.

1. Do you work? If yes: What do you do for a living? What is your occupation?
2. How long have you attended this congregation? What brought you to this congregation?
3. If respondent grew up in congregation: What was it like to grow up in this congregation? Follow up: Find out if individual left congregation and returned.
4. What makes you want to belong to this congregation?

II. Beliefs.

1. What are the most important beliefs and doctrines for this congregation? Optional follow up: What beliefs or doctrines make this congregation distinct?
2. How is the [Bible/Torah/Other Sacred Text] used in this congregation?
3. Tell me about prayer in the congregation. Possible follow-ups: What role does it play? How does the congregation pray? When? What do people pray about?
4. Do you pray? If yes: How often? What do you pray about?
5. Tell me about your basic religious or spiritual beliefs [substitute “Christian beliefs” or another substitute for religious/spiritual].
6. Optional: What religious or spiritual beliefs would you like to pass on to the next generation?
7. What does the [Bible/Torah/Other Sacred Texts] mean to you?
8. Do you talk about your religious beliefs outside of [church/synagogue/the congregation]? If yes: When? Where? Why?
9. Politically speaking, would your congregation be considered more on the conservative side, more on the liberal side, or somewhere in the middle? Follow-up: Why would you say that?
10. Religiously speaking, would your congregation be considered more on the conservative side, more on the liberal side, or somewhere in the middle? Follow-up: Why would you say that?

11. Optional: Are there any differences about religious belief within the congregation? If yes: What are they about? [Preface this question with, “This may be a hard question to answer” or another qualifier].

III. Music.

1. Describe the service(s) that you usually attend at your congregation? Walk me through the service(s). What is most important? What is least important?
2. What kind of music does your congregation use in its services? How do you feel about your congregation’s music?
3. Tell me about a particular aspect of the music in the service that is meaningful to you.
4. Optional (use if grew up in congregation or if you think they have witnessed significant changes in Ozarks music): What religious songs did you sing as a child? In what context did you sing them?
5. Ask Either A) or B) (Both if you have a lot of time) A) What song or songs have been most meaningful to you in your faith journey? Why? B) What is your favorite hymn or religious song? Why?
6. Is there anything you would like to change about your congregation’s music? If yes: What?
7. Optional: Is there a particular song or hymn that your congregation sings a lot? If yes: Can you tell me about it?
8. Has the music this congregation uses in worship changed over time? If yes: In what way? How do you feel about these changes?

IV. Material Culture.

1. Mentally walk me through your congregation’s building. Which parts of the building are most significant to you? Why? Optional follow-up: What objects or pictures in your congregation’s building are most significant to you? Why? Optional follow-up: Are there any material objects or pictures that you focus on during the service? If yes: Why?
2. What can you tell me about the changes in the building (both interior and exterior) since you started attending this congregation? How do you feel about them?
3. Is there anything you would like to change about the building (both interior or exterior)? If yes: What? [Make sure respondent talks about sanctuary and/or other religiously significant spaces].
4. Are there any places in the building that have been the subject of controversy or disagreement? If yes: Ask respondent to tell you about each controversy named.
5. Do people in your congregation bring any special books to worship such as a Bible or a prayer book? Possible follow-up: Why?

6. In your opinion, how should people dress for [day of service respondent attends] worship? How do people dress? Optional: Ask about multiple services.

V. Food.

1. What role does food play in your congregation (if any)? Follow-up: Ask respondent to elaborate, tell a story that illustrates his or her answer, etc.
2. Are there any foods or food events that are especially important to your congregation? If yes: Can you tell me about them?
3. Who prepares the food for events at your congregation?
4. Optional (If grew up in congregation or a similar congregation): As a child, do you remember eating particular foods at [church or the synagogue or other]? Can you tell me about those memories?
5. Does your congregation or religious tradition have any special rules about what people should eat or drink? Optional follow-up: Can you tell me how that works in practice?
6. Optional: Are there any foods that have special religious significance to your congregation?
7. Have there ever been any disagreements about food in your congregation? If yes: Can you tell me about it?

VI. Service.

1. Does your congregation engage in any social service ministry or other efforts to meet the needs of society? If yes: Could you tell me about it? How is your congregation involved? (Probes: Does congregation collaborate with other organizations? Does congregation work with regional or national denominational agencies? Is ministry at the local, state, national, or global level?)
2. Does your congregation run any in-house social service programs or ministries? If yes: What are they?
3. How important do you think it is for your congregation to engage in social outreach? If important: Why do you think it is important? If yes: What proportion of the congregation participates in these activities?
4. To what extent does your congregation combine spirituality with social ministry/outreach? Follow-up: Ask them to elaborate.
5. When doing social ministry/outreach, how much emphasis should be placed on evangelism? Follow-up: How much emphasis does your congregation place on it?
6. Are you part of any outreach your congregation does to the community? If yes: Could you tell me about it?
7. Has your congregation's involvement in social ministry changed over time? If yes: Tell me about it.
8. Are there any areas of social outreach that you would like to see your congregation get more involved in? If yes: Why?

VII. Congregational Change.

1. How has this congregation changed over time?
2. Where do you see the congregation going in the future?

VII. Basic Demographics.

1. Age: What is your age?
2. Gender: Record gender on the tape.
3. Race/Ethnicity: What racial or ethnic group(s) do you consider yourself a part of?
4. Marital Status: What is your marital status? Are you: Married, living with a partner, widowed, divorced, single.
5. Do you have any children? If yes: How many? How many live at home?
6. Education: What is the highest level of education you have obtained?

Questionnaire C

Questions for Pastors.

1. Where did you go to school? What degree(s)?
2. Take me through a normal work week.
3. Walk me through your sermon preparation.
4. Who are the major spiritual influences on your life?
5. Who is the target audience of JRA?
6. How would you describe the mission of JRA?
7. How would you describe the congregation theologically?
8. Describe how decisions are made at JRA (example: the move to three services). What kind of polity does it have?
9. How are conflicts or disagreements dealt with (theological disputes, etc.)? Example?
10. What organizations (churches, denominations, social agencies, government, businesses) are you affiliated with/partnered with (local, national, international)?
11. What congregations and leaders do you see as good examples to follow?
12. What kind of influence do you think JRA has on the national church body?
13. How would you describe the relationship between a person's spiritual commitment and their socioeconomic well-being?
14. Tell me about your perception of the Ozarks.

Additional Questions for John Lindell.

1. Talk about the founding of the congregation and its history (dates, locations, etc.).
2. Tell me about the seven building campaigns in sixteen years.

3. Explain why you use the title “John and Debbie, lead pastors.”
4. Describe your relationship with the Assemblies of God. What kind of communication do you have with them?
5. What is the policy on guest speakers?
6. “The Best is Yet to Come”: Where did that come from?