Marquette University
e-Publications@Marquette

Master's Theses (2009 -) Dissertations, Theses, and Professional Projects

How I Was Saved: Christian Faith Narratives in Contemporary Society

Allison Berg
Marquette University, alliecberg@gmail.com

Recommended Citation
Berg, Allison, "How I Was Saved: Christian Faith Narratives in Contemporary Society" (2012). *Master's Theses (2009 -)*. Paper 144.
http://epublications.marquette.edu/theses_open/144

HOW I WAS SAVED: CHRISTIAN FAITH NARRATIVES IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

by

Allison C. Berg

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School,
Marquette University,
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

May 2012

ABSTRACT
HOW I WAS SAVED: CHRISTIAN FAITH NARRATIVES
IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

Allison C. Berg

Marquette University, 2012

Recent studies indicate that Christian membership numbers have declined in the last few decades. At the same time, polls record that Americans are becoming more religiously diverse. Some scholars suggest that these changes in American society are also leading to changes in the ways that Christians talk about their faith. Since Christian theology and tradition demands that Christians continue to share their faith with others, it is necessary to understand the ways that Christians talk about their faith today. Of interest to this study are faith narratives: stories about one's faith journey and experiences. Through sharing stories about their faith experiences, it follows that these narratives possibly help Christian individuals construct and communicate a sense of identity to their audiences. Furthermore, in sharing their faith through storytelling, Christians arguably indirectly engage others to listen, understand, and possibly accept the underlying message of their stories without creating an argument or incivility in their audiences. While faith narratives hold historical longevity in the Christian community, research on the topic is outdated, and somewhat narrowly focused. This study broadens the ways that faith narratives are thought about and researched by viewing these stories through an identity constructionist perspective.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
Allison C. Berg

Similar to the saying "It takes a village to raise a child," no thesis is ever completed without the help of many people. First, I would like to express my most sincere thanks to my thesis committee chair, Dr. Sarah Feldner, for all of the time and effort she spent helping and guiding me through this process. Her method of never telling me the right answers, but leading me to find them on my own not only made me a more knowledgeable student, but a more confident writer. I would also like to thank my other thesis committee members, Dr. Lynn Turner and Dr. Susan Mountin, for their support and contributions in improving my work.

Second, I would like to thank my participants for their time and efforts in providing me with the richest data possible for this study. Their willingness to reveal deeply personal information about their lives and their faith is what made this study so meaningful. Furthermore, I would like to thank my friends and family for their unending support and encouragement throughout this entire process. I am so thankful they have been there for me throughout all of the ups and downs of writing a thesis. I could not have done this without them.

Finally, and most importantly, I would like to thank the Lord for His hand in this work. It is my greatest hope that His nature is revealed in this thesis. I have been blessed by each and every person involved in this thesis and I pray in return that the Lord showers blessings upon each of you.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS…….....i

CHAPTER

I. INTRODUCTION…….....1

A. OVERVIEW OF CHRISTIAN FAITH NARRATIVES IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY……..1

B. RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY……..1

C. PREVIEW OF THESIS……..2

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE……..5

A. RELIGION IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN SOCIETY……..6

B. INDIRECT COMMUNICATION……..8

C. NARRATIVE COMMUNICATION AND IDENTITY……...10

D. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK……...….12

E. SUMMARY……..18

III. METHODOLOGY……..20

A. THE INTERPRETIVE APPROACH……...20

1. PARTICIPANTS AND CONTEXT…….21

2. PROCEDURES……22

3. DATA ANALYSIS……..23

IV. RESULTS……26

A. FAITH NARRATIVES AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION…...26

1. BEFORE-AND-AFTER…...……27

a. BEFORE……..27

b. TRANSFORMATION…….30

c. AFTER…….32

2. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GOD AND IDENTITY...….34

3. EVANGELISM VS. RELATIONSHIP BUILDING……38

B. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS….……..42

C. FAITH NARRATIVES AND SHARED IDENTITIES……...44

1. FINDING THE HEART ISSUE…….....47

2. DOWN FROM THE MOUNTAINTOP……....49

3. CONTROL OF FAITH NARRATIVES…...……52

D. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS……...54

V. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION…….57

A. THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS……..60

B. PRAGMATIC IMPLICATIONS……..65

1. CHALLENGING EVANGELISM'S STIGMA……...65

2. PROVIDING RELATABLE AND DIVERSE EXAMPLES...67

C. LIMITATIONS……68

D. FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND CONCLUSION……..69

REFERENCES……..71

APPENDIX A……78

CHAPTER ONE:

INTRODUCTION

The landscape of Christianity in the United States is changing – church membership numbers are decreasing and Americans are becoming more religiously diverse (Religious Landscape Survey, 2008). Given these changes, I argue that it is increasingly salient to consider how Christians talk about their faith in contemporary American society. While there are many means by which Christians speak about their faith, in this thesis I consider one particular form of talk about Christian faith – the faith narrative. Previous researchers have elaborated on the ways in which individuals use narratives to construct and communicate their identities. Therefore, I intend to understand better the ways that Christians use their faith narratives to construct and communicate their identities to others, and consequently, how this identity construction process influences the ways in which these narratives are shared.

A great deal of research considers the form and function of the narrative itself as a rhetorical tool used by outlying individuals, such as the rich and famous, or illegal aliens; however, less scholarship exists that focuses on how "everyday" individuals talk about their faith narratives. My research addresses the ways in which everyday individuals talk about their faith narratives with others as well as how these narratives construct and communicate a sense of identity for Christian individuals.

Rationale for this Study

A review of the literature suggests that contemporary American society is becoming less religious and more religiously diverse (Religious Landscape Survey, 2008). Indeed, the current membership numbers of protestant congregations are

decreasing in the United States at the same time as religious diversity is on the rise (Religious Landscape Survey, 2008). And finally, scholars today are recognizing differences in the ways that Christians talk about their faith in public (Brereton, 1991).

While there are many forms of Christian talk (i.e. prayer, preaching, witnessing, etc.), of interest to this study are Christian faith narratives or stories about individuals' faith journeys and experiences. Although Christian talk is not a new concept, previous literature on faith narratives is narrowly focused on rhetorical analyses of the content of outlying individuals' faith narratives. In this study, I extend previous research by focusing on "everyday Christians" and their faith stories. Furthermore, I regard faith narratives as ways in which individuals actively construct meaning by using interviews to discern how participants create and communicate their identities through faith narratives.

Preview of the Thesis

The following chapters establish the framework for this study. In the next chapter I review the relevant literature for understanding the context, background, key concepts and theoretical framework involved in this study. Additionally, I explain why viewing faith narratives as identity construction processes is not only appropriate, but also beneficial to my research, and provide research questions as a guide for this study. In the third chapter I explain the research methods for this study. I conducted depth interviews with members of a large, suburban church in the upper Midwest about their faith narratives. Interview questions revolved around topics discussing the participants' Christian experience, talk about faith and evangelism and their use of faith narratives. Data was analyzed using constant comparative methods.

In the fourth chapter, I present the results of this study. In regard to my first research question which asked how do Christians' faith narratives influence individuals' identity construction processes, participant accounts revealed three themes that influence the ways in which individuals construct and communicate their identities in their faith narratives. First, participants construct their identities in a before-and-after pattern. Second, participants' understandings of their identities are closely tied to their understandings of their faith and who God is. Third, participants actively constructed their identities through their negotiations of their simultaneous desires to spread their faith to others and avoid appearing evangelistic.

In regard to my second research question which asked, how do Christians think about their faith narratives, I found three additional themes suggested in participant accounts as to how individuals share their faith narratives based on their identity constructions. First, participants thought about the sharing of their faith narratives in terms of relationship-building processes. Therefore, participants shared constructed and shared their narratives in a way that evoked an intimate relationship between the narrators and their listeners. This was most often accomplished through discovering and addressing the "heart issues" of their listeners. Second, participants thought about making their narratives as relatable as relatable as possible in order to increase the chances of their stories being understood and accepted by their listeners. Finally, participants thought about their narratives as opportunities to relinquish control to the Holy Spirit. In other words, participants spoke about not being in control of their narratives or the ways in which they were shared with others. Rather, the Holy Spirit was thought about as the one controlled when, how and with whom the stories were shared.

In the fifth and final chapter, I discuss the salience of these results as they relate to theoretical and pragmatic applications. In conclusion, I discuss this study's limitations and provide suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER TWO:

REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The religious culture in the United States is characterized by constant change and adaptation. Recently, Christian denominations have suffered dramatic membership losses (Religious Landscape Survey, 2008). Similarly, notable changes have arisen in the United States surrounding religious talk in public life. Indeed, within the last few decades one of the most familiar and repeated pledges by the American public, the Pledge of Allegiance, came under fire for its phrase "One nation under God." Other examples of the changes toward religious talk in public include persecution and attempts to stop Christians from praying in school (Clabough, 2011) and sharing phrases about religious holidays, such as "Merry Christmas." Christians seemingly remain dedicated to sharing their faith with others; although perhaps through changing the ways in which they talk about their faith. Therefore, it is important to better understand the ways in which Christians talk about and share their faith in a society where changes are occurring in regards to religious talk.

I begin this chapter by providing background information regarding the cultural shifts that might be prompting modern day Christians to use specific techniques to talk about their faith in public. This provides the context for a discussion of the ways that the Christian community discusses and shares their faith with others today. Here, I argue why specific attention should be paid to faith narratives and the reasons why this type of communication is essential to the Christian community. I discuss why it is important to understand faith narratives in the context of identity construction. In the second section

of this chapter, I provide the theoretical framework of social constructionism that guides this study. Finally, I present the research questions that guide my research.

Religion in Contemporary American Society

According to the Pew Forum's 2008 U.S. Religious Landscape survey, Christian membership numbers are changing dramatically in America. Indeed, some argue America's culture is now being threatened by a post-modern, post-Christian cultural shift where most Americans are church dropouts and the foundational Christian principles which built the nation are disappearing (Crouse, 2010; Meacham, 2009). Taking Christianity's place is an American population that is religiously diverse and less tied to religious institutions.

The concept of a population that is more religiously diverse and less tied to religious institutions, however, deserves a bit more explanation. America is becoming more religiously diverse in that the number of individuals who self-identify as Christians is shrinking; the percentage of Christians in America has fallen ten percent since 1990 (Meacham, 2009). This decline results from more children and young adults in America claiming no religious affiliation. For example, twice as many millennials (18 to 29 year olds) are unaffiliated as baby boomers, meaning that young adults today choose not to affiliate with any one religion (Religion Among the Millennials, 2010). The same decline can be seen among adults as well; almost one-quarter of adult Americans (a number which has doubled in recent years) left the faith in which they were raised for another religion, or more commonly, for no religion at all (Religious Landscape Survey, 2008).

The number of Americans who *do* choose affiliation with a religion has also become more fluid and diverse; and the changes are not in favor of Christianity. This fluidity and diversity is most apparent in congregational membership numbers. While the membership numbers of other non-Christian faiths are remaining relatively constant, most mainline Christian denominations are suffering dramatic losses. All major religious groups are, however, in the flux of simultaneously gaining and losing members. The Christian faith, however, is not gaining members at the same rate and speed with which it is losing members.

The hardest hit of all Christianity is American Protestantism (barely 51% of Christian adults). Not enough people are joining Protestant churches to offset the number of people leaving Protestant churches, and consequently, membership numbers are declining rapidly. Indeed, the Landscape survey (2008) predicts, if religious trends continue to progress in the same fashion, America will soon become a minority Protestant country. These recent extreme losses suffered by American Protestantism, the Pew Foundation's report argues, result from the significant internal diversity and fragmentation that has characterized the thousands of Protestant denominations from the very beginning. Today, however, that diversity and fragmentation has become more apparent, in that Protestant churches are now losing members at the highest and fastest rate of all Christian affiliations.

At the same time as the decreasing membership numbers in American society, researchers also notice shifts in the ways that Christians feel about religious talk in public life. Brereton (1991) researched religious talk over the past two centuries and found that American culture has shifted from a society where religious talk was the norm and could

be carried out in an easy, natural and spontaneous manner to a less receptive culture where sharing one's faith is viewed as a liability.

Indirect Communication

Unfortunately, keeping quiet about one's faith is not an option for Christians. Indeed, sharing the Christian faith is one of the primary responsibilities for Christians rooted in Biblical scripture. In Matthew 28:19-20 (NIV, 2010), Jesus tells his followers to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, [20] and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded [them]." Consequently, Christians are called to "be [God's] witness to all men of what [they] have seen and heard (Acts 22:15). Because of this, the Christian task has been to share their faith with others by talking about their faith experiences in the hopes of "reach[ing] the largest possible number of people in order to 'bring' them to 'Christ'" (Brereton, 1991, p. 76). Here arises the Christian belief that, although Christians are called to share their faith with others, Christians believe that ultimate salvation comes only from the Lord. Spurgeon (1963) explains,

> It's not our way of putting the Gospel, nor our method of illustrating it, which wins souls, but the Gospel itself does the work in the hands of the Holy Ghost. To Him we must look to the thorough conversion of men… it is not to be accomplished by our reasoning, persuasion, or threatening. It can only come from the Lord (pp. 122-123).

Therefore, Christians claim only to "plant a seed" of faith in another, not to carry out the actual conversion of a nonbeliever. Most often, this planting a seed of faith in others is carried out through the sharing of the Christian faith through talk. Since Christians might anticipate incivility when they share their faith with others, the question arises of how

Christians spread their faith in contemporary society, and consequently, what happens to the Christian faith if they do not.

The answer may lie in what Kierkegaard championed as *indirect communication* (as cited in Astely, 2004). This type of communication is more informal and less straightforward than other explicit forms of communication. Through this process, Astely explains, "the other person is engaged not by the directness and clarity of our message, but through its ambiguity and even its contradictions" (p. 119). The success of this approach is epitomized throughout the Bible in Jesus himself, who revealed the nature and intentions of God in parables (Astely). Thus, the story form of communication has always been quite popular in Christian culture. Researchers labeled and examined several different types of faith narratives in the Christian community (i.e. conversion narratives, testimonies, etc.) (Ward Sr., 2010). Each narrative, Ward Sr. argues, is unique to a certain audience and the nature in which it is shared by a narrator. He said,

> Speech directed to any one of these categories—believers, unbelievers, God—constitute a separate speech event which, in Fundamentalists' metacommunicative vocabulary, is given a different name. [For example] serious communication with believers is accomplished publicly by "sharing your testimony" and privately by "having fellowship"… (Ward Sr., 2010, p. 124)

Regardless of which story is chosen to be shared, Christians indirectly engage others to listen, understand, and possibly accept the underlying messages of the stories. Today's Christians may be finding it even more necessary to utilize the indirect story form of communication not only to share their faith with others, but also to provide a guide for salvation to a less religious and more religiously diverse population who "no longer takes it for granted that they must be 'saved'" (Brereton, 1991, p. 73).

Narrative Communication and Identity

Since researchers suggests that Christians utilize stories, it is important to understand the concept of narratives and what stories communicate. The oral performance of telling stories is not only considered an ancient art (Lwin, 2010), but is also a subject of study in multiple disciplines, such as psychology, anthropology, philosophy, and communication studies. Of more recent interest in these fields are personal narratives or stories about one's own experiences. The typical American adult typically tells and retells three to four repeatable personal stories over much of his or her life (Langellier, 1989). Consequently, researchers both within and outside of the communication field question how and why people communicate through narratives (Fisher, 1984; Stromberg, 1993; Taylor, 2006; Yamane, 2000).

One reason is that people tell stories to build intimacy with others (Langellier, 1989). As a result, researchers are concerned with how narrators mediate their events while they share their stories, even if the narrative has been promised to be a factual account (Langellier, 1989). Although an individual may change his or her story based on with whom the story is shared, this does not necessarily imply that narrators create false stories. Instead, each storytelling event is dynamic and unique in that the structure of the narrative may vary based on the narrators' interaction with the time, context and audience of the narrative. For instance, certain situational or material constraints help a narrator delineate what is meaningful from what is meaningless, what should be included in the narrative and what should not, and what contributes to understanding and what does not (Langellier & Peterson, 2004). In other words, Langellier and Peterson argue, "content is

not arbitrary but rather the ordering of information by and for a particular group which transforms information into communication" (p. 40).

Stark (2008) understood the importance of using stories to build interpersonal relationships in terms of Christian witnessing. Through an interpretation of a recent Baylor University survey, Stark found that Christians are more likely to witness to others with whom they have a close relationship (family members, friends, and neighbors) than those with whom their relationship is more distant (acquaintances, coworkers). Consequently, the least likely person to whom a Christian would tell their faith narrative is a complete stranger. This supports Langellier and Peterson's (2004) findings since a stranger would have no relationship with the narrator and consequently would be less likely to agree to participate in the listening of the faith story.

Although storytelling creates meaning through interpersonal contact between narrator and audience, Langellier and Peterson (2004) argue that storytelling also creates meaning *intra*personally. That is, through the telling of a story, a narrator also reveals information about himself/herself as a character, whether through a past experience re-lived in the telling, or a characterological identity revelation. Redman (2005) explained that identity is narratively configured in that, "the stories we tell to and about ourselves in some sense construct who we are" (p. 28). Chatham-Carpenter (2006) similarly argued that a person's self-concept is "integrally linked to communication, both interpersonally and intrapersonally" (p. 103). In other words, individuals use stories as a way to create and communicate an identity both for themselves and to communicate to others.

Several previous studies question whether narratively configured identities occur similarly in regard to religious communities. In one example, Howell and Dorr (2007)

found that college students engaging in short-term missions used narratives to construct identities that were quite different from the goals and values of long term missionaries. In another example, Mayer and Richardson (2010) discovered that former sex workers used narratives to construct new identities when those individuals became Christians. During a different study of undocumented Mexican immigrants, Ayometzi (2007) found that the telling of conversion narratives provides a standard form that reorganizes one's own (as a teller) understanding of one's self, and makes an identifiable structure available for the current and new members of the community through which they can all share a common identity that makes them part of a group. These examples suggest that religious communities do use narratives to construct and communicate their identities with others.

Because Christians often communicate through storytelling and previous research suggests the storytelling process reveals narrator's identities, it follows that I am concerned with how Christians use their narratives to construct and communicate their identities to others. In what follows, I outline a theoretical framework that develops the perspective on identity construction that guides this study.

Theoretical Framework

While there appears to be a consensus among communication researchers that individuals use narratives as tools for constructing and communicating identities, less agreement exists surrounding the concept of identity. In fact, in an appraisal of identity studies, James Cote (2006) highlighted that identity is a buzzword, or "rubber sheet" concept applied to a widespread array of research. Furthermore, he argues, the term "identity" is used interchangeably with "self", and the result is overwhelming confusion and an inability to distinguish between the two concepts. While creating concrete

definitions of identity and self might seem appropriate, Eisenberg (1998) argues that attaching ourselves to a chosen worldview of self and other, characterized by certainty and stability, would not only be our greatest weakness, but it would also "irreparably divide us from diverse others" (p. 101). Because of the damage created by a certain and stable worldview, a definition that discusses identity in terms of fluidity and transformation is most appropriate. Therefore for this study, identity is understood to be "the story individuals tell of who they are, a story derived from the negotiation of multiple and competing discourses" (Feldner, unpublished manuscript).

Inherent in this definition of identity are epistemological assumptions about truth in the world. Indeed, Cote (2006) believes that metatheoretical assumptions are what create the cleavages innate in most identity studies today. The major division occurs from whether one believes in an objective world where reality is fixed and independent of human influence, or in a subjective world where reality is ambiguous and dependent on social construction. Because those who claim an objective world believe in one truth and reality, for them, identity is discussed in terms of a real self and a fake self, or a true identity and a fake identity (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). This belief in a true identity is a fundamental characteristic of many well-accepted theories, including Goffman's (1959) theory of self-presentation.

Although Goffman's theory relies on subjectivity and social construction, Goffman still discusses identity in terms of presenting multiple fake selves depending on the audience for which the individual is performing. Goffman's theory assumes that individuals present themselves like actors on a stage putting on a play for others. Individuals are considered "onstage" when presenting themselves to others, and this is

done by the impressions given (verbal communication) and given off (nonverbal communication) to others. Yet individuals also move "backstage" where Goffman argues they behave in accordance with their true selves.

The definition chosen for this paper, on the other hand, claims affinity with a subjective worldview because it assumes that an individual's identity is socially constructed, and although ever-changing, the story one tells about who he or she is at a particular moment is nevertheless the real and true identity in that instant. Identities are socially constructed in that human understanding is "*social* in the sense that our concepts are human-made and are part of a shared language… and *constructed* in the sense that our claims, interpretations, and orientations constitute 'conceptual fabrics' that weave together contingent set of beliefs and social practices." (Schiappa, 1993, p. 419). In other words, human reality is created and renegotiated through the agreement of constructed practices such as symbols and language. These negotiations and renegotiations therefore result in a local and fleeting reality that inherently depends on time and context (Raskin, 2002). The concepts of what is real and meaningful for people may change the next day or within a different location. Furthermore, since social constructions rely on the consent of everyone involved, multiple realities exist at any given time.

Based on a subjective worldview of reality and truth, Eisenberg (1998) argues that identity, and similar ideas concerning one's concept of self or one's self-presentation, is neither fixed in certainty, nor is it independent from the world. Rather, identity is transformative, open to multiple meanings through the negotiation or mediation of conflicting dialogues, and equivocally linked to context because the self is socially constructed. Tracy and Trethewey (2005) synthesize all of these elements and challenge

all to consider switching the terminology of real selves and fake selves to "crystallized selves," where individuals…

> …have differing forms depending upon whether they grow rapidly or slowly, under constant or fluctuating conditions, or from highly variable or remarkably uniform fluids or gasses, crystallized selves have different shapes depending on the various discourses through which they are constructed and constrained. (p. 187)

Through this perspective, individuals employ multiple identities over time and context. However, a person's multiple selves, according to the subjective worldview, do not always need to be in harmony. In fact, many academicians have adopted the approach that identity is a negotiation or mediation between multiple, and oftentimes conflicting, dialogues (Comello, 2009). One example Comello uses is of a professional woman who is also a mother. Comello explains that the woman may not believe that she can be successful in both roles, but if she encounters someone who is, then she can create a new self that represents a favorable combination of each. Researchers refer to this process of negotiating identities as *identity work*. According to Kuhn (2006), identity work is an "actor's" efforts to create a coherent sense of self in response to the multiple (and perhaps conflicting) scripts, roles, and subject positions encountered in both work and non-work activity. Here, discourses are framed as tools employed in creating identities" (p. 1341). In other words, individuals use discourses (linguistic devices that guide interpretations of experiences) (Kuhn et al, 2008) as tools for constructing and reconstructing who they are in every aspect of their lives. But individuals do not necessarily have to create a new self in order to synthesize conflicting identities. Indeed, Alvesson and Wilmott (2002) argue that the self is "a practical everyday accomplishment" (p. 625) where discourses favor some interests over others during a

particular time. Ultimately, Comello posits, identity "marks a great assortment of selves as 'me' – and it does so without wiping out distinctions between selves" (2009, p. 347). In this way, dialogue is not only a means to, but is also an end product of identity construction.

This study posits that identity is a socially constructed, ongoing, and discursive process by which individuals come to understand who they are through multiple and sometimes competing dialogues. Furthermore, storytelling is one discursive method that individuals may use to interpret their faith experiences and consequently construct their identities.

This study expands upon previous research in several ways. First, existing research on faith narratives is focused narrowly in regard to sample populations and methodological analyses. Most researchers examine faith narratives through rhetorical analyses of autobiographies or personal journals for data and information (Brereton, 1991; Griffen, 1990; McLennan, 1996). Interviews used as an information-gathering tool are a rarity. However, depth interviews provide additional information that focuses on the understandings of the participants. Second, most faith narrative research understandably focuses on high profile, yet outlying, individuals. For instance, Ayometzi (2007) researched faith narratives in the context of a Mexican community of illegal aliens in America. Maruna, Wilson, and Curran's (2006) were among the few faith narrative researchers who conducted interviews; yet the interviews were conducted on prisoners. Mayer and Richardson (2010) focused solely on individuals had previously worked in the sex industry. The last group of individuals who receive the most attention regarding their faith narratives is the rich and famous, such as Griffin's (1990) and McLennan's (1996)

studies on President Nixon's White House Special Counsel during the Watergate scandal, Chuck Colson. While these groups are no doubt interesting because of their extreme circumstances, the "everyday" Christian's faith narrative are unstudied largely by the scholarly community. No one knows whether everyday Christians share their faith similarly to these outlying groups or whether they share them in completely different ways.

In this study, I expand previous research through my focus of study, my participant sample and my methodology. I use interviews to better understand how everyday Christians share their faith with others through storytelling and how those faith narratives construct and communicate a sense of identity for their narrators.

Summary

A review of the literature suggests that contemporary American religious culture is categorized by diversity and fluidity between religions. Similarly, researchers note recent changes in the ways that Christians share their faith with others today (Brereton, 1991; Stark, 2008). In this study I explain how Christians communicate with others through one form of communication, the faith narrative. Because previous researchers found ties between narrative communication and identity construction (Archakis, 2005; Dumanig, David, & Dealwis, 2011; Thompson et al, 2009), I also consider how Christians use their faith narratives to construct and communicate their identities to others.

In this study, I expand on areas of previous research in several ways. First, many narrative researchers use rhetorical analyses to study written narratives. Because I believe faith narratives are more often spoken than written, I choose to employ interviews as a research tool. Second, previous research on faith narratives focuses mainly on outlying individuals, such as the rich and famous, or individuals in unusual situations, such as the incarcerated or illegal aliens. In this study, I purposely chose "everyday" ordinary individuals as my sample population, since I believe these are the greatest number of individuals who might benefit from research in this area. Finally, I expand previous research by focusing on how Christians share their faith narratives with others, and how Christian faith narratives construct and communicate a sense of identity for their narrators. This study fulfills a need to understand Christian faith narratives as both interpersonal tools of faith communication and intrapersonal avenues for constructing identity. The following research questions provide a guide for this study:

RQ1: How do Christians' faith narratives influence individuals' identity construction processes?

RQ2: How do Christians think about their faith narratives?

CHAPTER THREE:

METHODOLOGY

Faith narratives are orally performed stories about an individual's spiritual journey and identity transformation. In order to better understand how these stories are shared and what influence they have on the everyday Christian's identity construction, I turn to the interpretive approach. This approach helps examine the role that faith narratives play the identity construction process.

The Interpretive Approach

The interpretive approach in communication research is often utilized to explain the socially constructed processes of communicative interaction (Miller, 2005; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). In other words, the interpretive approach is useful for understanding the linguistic processes that individuals construct meaning through. The interpretive approach assumes that humans live in a social world characterized by relationships with other human beings, where meaning is said to be created intersubjectively, "as individuals bring their own understanding into interaction, and these understandings evolve and develop through communicative behavior" (Miller, 2005, p. 60). The interpretive approach seeks to understand this process, and the meanings created during interactions with others.

The interpretive approach is appropriate for this study because my aim is not to discover the theological underpinnings of the participants' faith narratives, but rather to understand how these narratives are shared with others and what influence the process of sharing these narratives has on the narrator's identity construction. Since both the construction of a narrative and an individual's identity are regarded as communicative

processes (Fisher, 1984; Chatham-Carpenter, 2006), studying their influences on each other through the interpretive approach is most beneficial to better understanding the meanings derived from them.

Participants and Context

I gathered participants from a Christian megachurch[1] residing in the suburbs of a large Midwestern metropolis. I chose this specific church because of its size and congregational makeup, which allowed for convenience during the participant recruitment. Informants were chosen to recruit participants and were selected based on their knowledge and accessibility to individuals within the church setting I chose for the study. I prompted informants to recruit ten individuals willing to volunteer for a study about Christian communication.

Ten participants were selected for this study through a snowball sampling technique or sampling by referral (Welch, 1975). Snowball sampling, a type of convenience sampling, occurs when referrals for other participants are made through one member of the target population. This technique is appropriate when "the population of interest cannot be identified other than by someone who knows that a certain person has the necessary experience or characteristics to be included" (MacNealy as cited in Koerber & McMichael, 2008, p. 460). Five participants were male and five participants were female, and their ages ranged from 33 to 68. The participants' professions included missionary, realtor, attorney, editor, biomedical engineer, nurse, entrepreneur, police officer, traffic clerk, an individual in the financial industry and one retired individual. All of the participants were middle class European Americans living in suburban areas in the upper Midwest.

[1] Megachurches are composed of congregations with a minimum of 2,000 members, with some reaching an average weekly worship attendance of 10,000 plus (Warf & Winsberg, 2010; Thumma & Bird, 2008).

Procedures

Potential participants were initially gathered by email and telephone. If contact was made through email, participants received a written explanation of the study. Conversely, if contact was made by telephone, individuals received an immediate verbal explanation of the study. A popular method for obtaining results using the interpretive approach is interviewing. In-depth interviews are referred to as the art of asking questions and listening (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Indeed, using the in-depth interview as an information-gathering tool is an appropriate method when the interviewer wants the participant's voice to be heard. Therefore, the interviewer often takes a "back seat" during the interview by acting as a sort of host: initiating introductions, providing neutral questions, moving the interview from one part to another, and by providing closure (Barone & Switzer, 1995). The hopes of the interviewer in playing the role of host, is that by providing a comfortable and neutral environment, the richest data possible can be collected.

Interviewees were asked a series of questions from a standard interview protocol (See Appendix). Questions revolved around topics discussing the participants' Christian experience, talk about faith in public life, evangelism and their use of faith narratives. Open-ended questions provided a guide to the interviews; however, certain techniques were used to make the interviews as successful and information-rich as possible. One such technique includes a funnel sequencing of the questions, where broad questions are funneled into more narrow or focused questions throughout the interview (Barone & Switzer, 1995). Furthermore, both Gorden (1992) and Barone and Switzer (1995) suggest allowing participants the freedom to explicate their responses, and where

necessary, for the interviewer to use probing questions to dig deeper for details and understanding. Therefore, in this study, although the interviews generally followed the intended interview questions, follow up questions may have been asked when clarity was needed. Furthermore, probing and follow-up questions also helped develop a deeper understanding and encouraged discussion on additional topics and related issues.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face with each of the participants and lasted between forty-five minutes and two hours. For data analysis and confidentiality, each interviewee was assigned a pseudonym, but basic demographic information was not changed. Additional confidential information, such as names of churches attended, names of other individuals included during the interviews and geographical locations were also omitted from the data. Detailed notes were written during the audio recorded interviews, and after completion of each interview further notes were recorded akin to ethnographic field notes. These notes discussed important aspects of the interviewees' behaviors and any important characteristics of their narrative performances. Later, the interview notes were reviewed for common themes, and the interviews were then selectively transcribed based on these common themes for further analysis.

Data Analysis

My analysis concentrated on how participants talked about the ways in which they shared their narratives, as well as any references made to identity. I accomplished this through analyzing emergent themes in their talk about unspoken ground rules that the participants developed in regards to their narrative performances. These ground rules, as Langellier (1989) suggests, focused mainly on questions of with whom the narrative is shared, what aspects of the narrative are included in the narrative performances, when

and where the narratives are shared, as well as why the narrative performances are repeated. The answers to these questions lead to a greater understanding of how participants construct their identity using their narratives.

Data were analyzed from this study using the constant comparative method. The ultimate goal of the constant comparative method is to reach "saturation" of the data, where the same pattern of results is found consistently within the data, and no new findings are occurring (Glaser & Strauss, p. 104; Hallberg; 2006). From this saturation of the data, a concluding "big picture" can be drawn from the relevant literature. In other words, once common themes are discovered, an overall understanding of the data is then suggested. This method of analysis provided me with a richer understanding of how and why faith narratives are constructed and shared with others in specific ways.

During the analysis of the data, I reviewed the notes I had taken during the interviews as well as the actual interview transcriptions for common and repeated themes as they related to the research questions. Throughout the transcription process, I carefully recorded interesting elements and questions that were raised while listening to the data. Subsequently, through a comparison of the interview notes and audio transcriptions, I began to recognize recurring concepts and ideas and compiled these findings into a list of initial categories. After the creation of these categories, I returned to the data to discover supporting passages and quotes of each category; this was accomplished through a consistent comparison of one interview against another, all the while looking for congruencies and in-congruencies as well as relationships between the findings. Throughout this process my aim was to examine and better understand how the

participants talked about the construction and performance of their faith narratives and identities. In the following section, I will discuss the results of the interviews.

CHAPTER FOUR:

RESULTS

This chapter reveals the complex, meaning-making processes that surround the ways that Christians construct their identities and share their faith with others. In answer to my first research question, which asked how Christians' faith narratives influence their identity construction, I found that participants talked about their identity construction processes through three repeated themes: 1) before-and-after identity construction, 2) understandings of their identities based on their understandings of God's identity, and 3) tensions between identifying with their Christian identity and avoiding appearing evangelistic when they share their narratives. Each of these three themes contributed not only to the ways that participants constructed their identities but also the ways in which they consequently constructed and shared their faith narratives with others.

In answer to my second research question, which asked how individuals think about their faith narratives with others, I found three additional themes: 1) participants think about their narratives as relationship-building processes, 2) participants think about the relatability of the narratives to their audiences, and 3) participants think about who is in control of their narratives. This chapter discusses each of these themes in detail as they relate to my research questions.

Faith Narratives and Identity Construction

Throughout the interviews, participants mentioned several different types of narratives that they use to share their faith with others. The two most talked about faith narratives were conversion narratives and testimonies. Each of these stories held special meanings for their narrators in regard to who they are as individuals and what God has

done for them throughout their lives. As a result, participants used their faith narratives as ways to construct and communicate their identities to their audiences. Three themes in particular arose out of the interviews in response to my first research question which asked how Christians' faith narratives influence their identity construction. In this next sections, I discuss each of these three themes in detail as they relate to the participants' identity construction processes.

Before-And-After

Jacobs (2008) argues that, instead of providing a simple recount of events like biographies and memoirs do, faith narratives provide a full account of a life's course and direction: a way of explaining John Newton's "I once was lost, but now I'm found." Participant accounts supported this claim in that the individuals' faith narratives provided more than a recounting of faith experiences. Instead, participants used their narratives as ways to express to others who they were before their faith transformed them into the individuals they are today. Consequently, participants used a before-and-after structure to aid them in constructing and communicating their identities. As a result of using the structure of their narratives to communicate their identities, each stage of their narratives was essential to the identity construction process. Specifically, participants talked about disassociating from their past identities in the before stage, and using their faith experiences to construct new identities in the present and future.

Before

Participants talked about the first stage of their faith narratives as their opportunity to reveal to their audiences who they were before their faith experiences had changed them and to disassociate from those past identities. Participants talked about this

stage in terms and phrases such as, “who I was,” “pre-Christian,” “before I was saved” or “before I was a Christian.” Indeed, participant accounts revealed that participants no longer identified with the person who they were in the before stage. However, participants felt that explaining who they were in the past was necessary in helping their audiences understand who they are today. Participant accounts revealed that common understandings of this stage were that individuals should talk about their struggles and weaknesses.

Participants explained that they felt consumed by regret, sadness and guilt due to their sinful past. During this time in their life, participants revealed feelings of unhappiness, anger, and dissatisfaction with their lives that closely parallels previous research on the state of individuals during their life before their identity transformation (Stromberg, 1993). For some participants, this struggle with sin remained an internal, emotional and/or identity struggle, and for many, this identity was manifested through physical behaviors. Joe, an entrepreneur, shared that during this time before he converted to Christianity, his dissatisfaction with life was revealed through his constant thoughts about gaining more material goods, such as fancy cars, boats and homes. When none of those material goods brought contentment or satisfaction, Joe, a married entrepreneur with a family, eventually engaged in a year-long affair with a married woman. Fred, a traffic clerk, also spoke about his past identity in terms of his behaviors:

> I was not always a good person. In my younger days I hurt a lot of people in my life. And, that wasn’t right. I mean, I liked to fight. I don’t anymore, I don’t want to hurt nobody no more. Yeah, I just Friday night, go out, see how many people I could hurt, and that would make me feel good I guess. Because I played football for a lot of years, I didn’t mind getting hit or hitting people or anything like that. But as I drank, I just felt like I was empowered by Satan, I guess is what you would call it… Um it was like I wanted to kill somebody and um, because I thought about killing my ex-wife, I thought about killing her lover, and then my

> kids would have been without a father… The older I got, it's been quite a few years since I've drank, or done any drugs, I used to do all kinds of stuff and it was just wrong. If I could have my life all over to do again I would change how I treated people.

Participant accounts, like Fred's, reflected how remembering their past identities remained an emotional and hurtful experience for the participants. Because participants no longer identified with who they were before their faith experiences changed them, many became emotional during the interviews when recalling who they were and the decisions they had made during this stage.

Although the participants referenced this stage as important in helping their audiences understand how different their present identities are from their past identities, the participants also hinted at commonly understood cultural rules which cautioned against spending too much time discussing this stage. Participants suggested that they had learned from others not to place too much emphasis on their past identities for the reason that this would place too much emphasis on who they were instead of who God is. Indeed, participants, like Sven, argued that narrators should downplay the before stage. If too much focus is placed on an individual's life before their identity transformation, Sven argued, the story becomes more self-focused and a "pity-party." Therefore, although participants felt free to explain their own unique experiences and identities before their faith experiences transformed their identities, they also understood they should spend the least amount of time discussing this phase during their narratives. Alternatively, the next two stages were areas of their life and their identity that the participants highlighted for their audiences.

Transformation

In the second stage, participants included in their narratives a moment or moments in time when they felt their identity was transformed due to an experience with their faith. Common understandings of this phase prompted the participants to discuss a time in their life where they were transformed by the grace of God. Although these experiences varied greatly among the participants, individuals also understood that they should always give the credit for their transformations to God. Because each of the participants' experiences varied so greatly, participants were most likely to try and make this stage of their narratives unique from anyone else's.

How the participants shared this stage of their identity transformation depended greatly on their identities before their experiences. For instance, Beth, a woman who was brought up in the Christian faith but had strayed from it during the beginning years of her marriage, spoke of "an encounter with the Lord." She considers that day the exact moment of her conversion. However, for some, an identity transformation took considerably longer. Gus, a biomedical engineer and self-proclaimed intellect, spoke of his transformation experience as an entire year of intense study and reflection of the Christian faith. Still others' experiences took even longer. Although Fred also referenced a specific date for his identity transformation , he often spoke about his experience in terms of a lifetime with sayings such as "my heart has always seeked Him out," and that God was always opening and shutting proverbial doors in his life that led Fred to eventually accept his need for the Lord.

Where explaining an identity transformation experience became extremely difficult for participants, however, occurred when participants had always identified

themselves as Christians. In these cases, the participants spoke still of a need and obligation to share their faith story with others, but struggled with sharing a story which did not follow the traditional content and structure of the stories told by converts. As a solution to this problem, many of the participants adhered to talking about their faith in the same before-and-after pattern, but the focus was turned to growing in their faith or receiving certain revelations about their relationship with God. For instance, Sven considered himself to have always been a Christian. He talked about growing up knowing religious facts and citing scripture from the Bible. Sven's faith "before" was knowing facts and being able to defend his faith through his intellect and knowledge of certain religious topics. Alternatively, as Sven continued to grow and learn about his faith, his "after" stage was a more relational faith (his relationship with Jesus) where he was more concerned about what he was feeling in his heart, than what he knew in his head. Patrick concurred, stating:

> My salvation story is being born into a Christian family, I was baptized, I grew up knowing Jesus, and as I've gotten older and older and older, um… I've gotten to know Him more personally and better and I think something happens when you hit a certain age. … And part of what I would tell somebody if I'm sharing my faith story to say, I reached a point where the things that used to be really important to me aren't really that important anymore. And … my focus is starting to shift from living for here and now, and trying to make the best of my circumstances, to having a more long term, eternal point of being. Because long term thinking is mature thinking, short term thinking is immature thinking.

Patrick, like Sven, also found himself trying to both adhere to the common understandings of what a faith narrative should look like and make his story unique. Through this account, Patrick exemplifies how participants who grew up Christian negotiated ways to create their own form of the identity transformation experience. His quote and others found in the participant accounts also suggest that those participants'

unique situations, in that they had always identified with the Christian faith, still allowed the individuals to make sense of their spiritual journey in terms of before-and-after transformations.

After

Participant accounts reflected that the last stage, the after stage, was the most important for the participants in terms of revealing their present identity. This stage was characterized by the participants with phrases such as "who I am today" and "after I was saved" and with expressions of rightness, contentment and peace. Whereas the participants spoke about their before stage in terms of sinfulness, after their identity transformation they spoke of "growing in their faith," "abundant love from Christ and for others," and a feeling of purpose. Gus explains:

> I think it's understanding His true nature. Really understanding how passionately, purposely, and patiently, He pursued me and to try to understand that kind of love. For 34 years I didn't want to talk to Him. I didn't want to embrace Him. I didn't want to have a conversation with Him. … It kinda gets to you. So yeah I think, the more, that's my pursuit is to know him more. You know I knew Him back in '94 but I only knew little bit, and I only knew Him, kind of loved Him with my mind. He continues to reveal more and more and there is so much more and now we all talk about fullness. … Who we are today, that's nice. But who we are destined to be is amazing.

Gus' quote suggests how his understanding of himself is similarly related to his understanding of God's identity. As Gus learned more about who God is and who God has destined him to be, Gus better understood who he is as a person and who God is molding him to be in the future. Louise felt similarly in her after stage. In the story that she wrote for her granddaughter which she shared during her interview, she said:

> It is the Spirit who has transformed my life, given me joy beyond comprehension, peace that passes understanding, and a foundation that is sure and eternal. But the Spirit used the answer to fill me with something that is dearer and richer and more fulfilling that any temporal blessing, success, wealth, fame…that I can imagine.

> Sometimes I think I will explode for the joy that is in me. It is not happiness as in "everything is good and rosy"; it is a deep, abiding, inner peace, a soaring awareness that fills my heart even during the most difficult times (like Grandpa's cancer).

Participant accounts like Gus' and Louise's illustrated that the participants were happy with who they are today, and excited for who they will be in the future. Indeed, many of the participants acknowledged that their sense of identity is still changing with each new revelation from God and therefore, although they are happy with their present identity, as in Gus's case, they look forward to their future identity.

In summary, participants used their faith narratives to construct their identities in a before and after pattern. This process of disassociating from who they used to be before their transformations, and through attempting to explain who they are, and eventually who they will be because of how God transformed them, is essentially identity work. In other words, each participant created a sense of self by dissociating from previous identities and associating with new identities that resulted from their faith experiences. This is identity work because participants actively engaged in constructing who they are today as Christians from who they used to be as nonbelievers, or in some cases, as Christians who did not previously understand their identities as Christians. This identity work was carried out by the participants during the before and after discourses that they used during the construction of their faith narratives. Another theme that emerged when considering how the participants used their narratives to construct their identities was that individuals made sense of who they are as closely tied to their understandings of God and their subsequent relationship status with Him. Therefore, according to the participants, their narratives were viewed as ways of publicly acknowledging who God is and how He is working in their lives, and consequently, the

stories provided a standard form of reorganizing their own understanding of themselves. Both of these functions were described by the participants as equally significant reasons as to why they repeatedly shared their stories with others and will now be discussed in detail.

The Relationship Between God and Identity

Participant statements like "I share my story so that others know who I am," alluded to the importance for each of the participants to provide an understanding for others of their sense of identity and how their lives have changed since their identity transformation. Some shared their narratives with those with whom they have a close intimate relationship in order to impart wisdom and lessons learned through life experiences. Louise, a retiree, chose to share her narrative with her six grandchildren as a way of sharing who she is and how she came to this identity in the hopes that her story might resonate with them and persuade them to join the faith. Others shared their narratives with those who intimately knew them before their transformation in order to help them better understand the drastic changes to their personalities and lives. Fred, a traffic clerk, explained:

> When I first became saved and uh… my family really didn't know what to think of me. But they knew me through my whole life, and sometimes I had a temper. I don't anymore. Um, as soon as I became saved, they didn't know how to take me at first…

The ways in which Louise and Fred talked about sharing their narratives illustrates why the participants spoke about sharing their narratives with others with whom they had an intimate relationship: to explain themselves and the instances that led them to this sense of identity. This new sense of identity relayed in the after stage was never ascribed as a result of their own efforts. Louise explains that the Lord was:

> …much more present, active, intimately loving me, molding me, drawing me to Himself, than I perceived, and it is probably still true today.

Like Louise, all of the participants attributed their transformations of self-identity to God and His efforts in changing them. This concept of God changing them was not only evidenced by the participants own realization of how God was working in their lives, but was also suggested to be deeply rooted in their knowledge of Christian theology. Thus, the longer the individuals had been Christians, the more experiences they could share of the ways in which they knew and understood how God had changed them.

Therefore as Christians, the participant accounts suggested, their identities are closely related to their perceptions of who God is and how they perceive their relationships with Him. Because of this, many of the participants' narrative performances functioned as reaffirmations for themselves, as well as public declarations to others, of who God is and how He has influenced the participants' lives. For instance Gus, a biomedical engineer, stated:

> Who I was in '94 is different than who I was when, … in 2003. And I'm different in today, in 2011, than I was in 2003. My testimony is growing. I'm testifying who Jesus Christ is for me, how I relate to Him, and I'm revealing who He is in the world.

As Gus' quote implies, the sharing of faith narratives often served as a reminder to the participants, as well as reaffirmed for them and for others who they are and what, or who, was responsible for their changes. For many, this sense of identity that God gave them was summed up by the term "freedom." In explanation, participants like Ruth, a widower, talked about feeling a sense of peace and redemption from the sins that used to hold them, as they would say, "prisoner" in the past. Whereas the participants talked about themselves in the past as "angry," "dissatisfied" and "hopeless," they referred to

themselves presently as "content," and filled with "joy" and "purpose." Ultimately, this sense of identity was God's doing. Carol, an individual in the financial industry, explains:

> The point of the stories is to show how God so much loved us that even though we were these ugly, stinking, unholy people that did it to ourselves because of rebellion, He is going to come down and be the Savior because His justice demands that, so that then we can be back in His presence. That's the story.

Showing how God personally "came down" to touch each of their lives, participant accounts indicated, provides an explanation for others not only who God is, but also how He transforms individuals. In other words, individuals felt they had little control in their changes, but instead, that God was the one who saved them from themselves.

Sharing the narratives also seemed to provide the participants with a standard form for reorganizing their identities and their perceptions of God's identity; for with each re-telling new insight could be gained in regard to both their identities and God's. For instance, Patrick claimed:

> … You have to pay attention to how God's working in your life. What I might brush off as a coincidence is really God working. So the more you pay attention to that, the more rich that story becomes, and the more rich it is, the more helpful it is to have other people understand how God's working, and how God can work in their lives.

In other words, participants mentioned times that they shared their story where they suddenly had a revelation about God or the part He played in their lives that they were not aware of during the times when the narratives were shared. Therefore, participants composed every story with ways in which they changed from who they used to be, and this change was always attributed to God. Through talking about these changes (i.e. I was this, but now I am this) what they seem to be doing is constructing a particular identity for themselves. Therefore in telling their story, the participants are actually

telling a story about who they are. This contrast of before (I was this) to after (I am now this) is essentially an identity construction process in that individuals disassociate from who they previously were, and associate with present characteristics.

Indeed, participant accounts reflected that with each re-telling of their stories, the participants felt their understandings of God changed or further developed, and consequently their understandings of who they are as individuals also changes. In fact, participants talked about their perceptions of God much differently when they were asked to think about their relationship with Him before they became a Christian. Whereas individuals talked about God as uncaring and autocratic in the past before they learned more about Him in church or from others, participant accounts revealed that individuals presently use several common characteristics when referring to God, some of which were "loving," "compassionate" and "relational". Furthermore, when asked who God is to them, participants would often simply state "He is my everything" or "I am nothing without Him." Consequently, their faith narratives linguistically reflected this journey of growth and understanding of God's identity. Additionally, these linguistic elements reflect the ways in which participants made sense of their experiences and identities through the same before and after process of identity construction. Before their transformations they saw God one way, and after growing in their relationships with Him they constructed His identity differently.

These repeated characteristics and phrases seemed to be not only attributed to personal realizations over time, but also through learning about God in church and through listening to others talk about God in conversations. When asked how they learned about their faith, the two most common answers were in church or through

conversations with other Christians. The terms and phrases used to describe God's identity, and possibly their own, suggest that the ways in which individuals in the Christian community talk about their faith (either in church or with others in conversation) impacts the ways that the participants perceive God's identity, and consequently how they talk about Him when they publicly declare their relationship with Him when they share their narratives. Therefore, the participants' identifications with their Christian communities greatly impacted the identity work that was carried out during their narratives.

This Christian identity, which participants understood in terms of God's identity, was fluid and complex in that the identity was composed of multiple, often competing identities. The tensions created between these identities were often revealed throughout the participants' interviews. In the next section I discuss one of the most prominent identity struggles, and the third theme, that influenced the ways that participants constructed their identities through their narratives.

Evangelism vs. Relationship Building

Since participants' identities were closely tied to their understandings of their faith and the Christian community, the participants' narratives were often composed of discourses about synthesizing their Christian identities with other, often competing identities. Consequently, competing and sometimes conflicting tensions riddled the participants' narratives. One of the most prominent tensions was a competing desire among the individuals to use their narratives as ways to spread their faith to others while at the same time to avoid appearing evangelistic.

Participants revealed that one of the reasons they share their narratives is because of their identity as a Christian. Many of the individuals spoke of an awareness that one of their "duties" as a Christian is to share their faith with others. For example, when asked if and why she shared her faith stories with others, Carol stated:

> Well, part of it is God-driven. He's just been, "tell the stories."… And so when I started asking the Holy Spirit, it was kind of like the Holy Spirit said, "Tell my stories, tell my stories" and then I kind of ask, well "what do you mean?" and um, we just went on this journey of discovering what that meant, and I've been on it a while now… God called us all to be fishers of men. We are all to share our faith, the reason why we have this joy, and this hope.

Fred similarly stated, "And I read elsewhere in the Bible, that God says "go tell people about me, and let me do the work after that." Therefore, participant accounts supported previous researchers' (e.g. James, 1978 and Harding, 1987) finding that sharing faith stories functions largely as a way to proselytize or bring more individuals to the faith. For example, Fred talked about wanting everyone he meets to know and have a relationship with God like he does. He stated, "I find myself trying to get a message out to whoever I talk to about God. To start a walk with Him."

However, participants also struggled with this concept of using their narratives to recruit new members to their faith. Indeed, most of the participants seemed to (both knowingly and unknowingly) wrestle with competing desires to fulfill their "duty" as a Christian to share their faith with others, while simultaneously sharing their narratives in a way that would avoid appearing evangelistic to others, because most considered evangelism an undesirable trait.

Although the participants did not attend nor identify with an evangelistic denomination, participant accounts suggest awareness on the part of the individuals as to the reputation that Evangelists receive. Collectively, participants identified those

individuals as what one respondent, Gus, described as "club Christians," or Christians who are known for trying to convert anybody and everybody to the Christian faith while disregarding whether or not their audience is willing to listen or cooperate. Furthermore, evangelical Christians were perceived by the participants to use coercion techniques to carry out their agendas. For example, Beth recalled how her mother would use her and her brother to hand out tracts on how to be saved at a local mall. She said:

> I was brought up that way. I mean at age four and five my brother and I were handing out tracts in the mall, when the mall was safe. She'd drop us off, and us two, we were just barely walking and we had tracts and go up to people and "do you want to be saved?" And it was, our pastor had written a tract on how to be saved. We'd get stacks and she'd bring us over there a couple times a week.

Later on in her interview Beth said that her mom most likely used her and her brother in this way because it was a lot more difficult for adults to say no to children. Beth's account further explains the opinion that most of the participants held about evangelical Christians: these individuals are not concerned with building and maintaining relationships with others. In her situation, Beth and her brother simply handed out tracts and quickly left. Because of their perceived disregard for social filters and building and maintaining relationships with others, most of the participants viewed evangelical Christians, or simply being evangelistic, negatively and thus many did not identify with this characteristic.

For example, although Hannah worked as a missionary for seven years, she claimed that she was not an evangelist because she was introverted and chose in most situations not to discuss her faith with others openly. Gus and Sven did not identify with "club Christians" either and therefore would avoid "making people a project" by trying to

get others to convert. Beth, even though she grew up with an evangelistic mother, did not identify with evangelism either. She stated:

> I'm not necessarily evangelist, okay, mom was trying to make me an evangelist. That's not really who I am.

Indeed, not only did the participants disassociate with evangelism, they also did not want to appear evangelistic to others. Therefore, many participants chose not to share their faith with others in ways that would make them appear to be so. For instance, performing their faith narratives for strangers was almost never discussed by the participants. Furthermore, participants stated that they were unlikely to share their narratives in public places, such as the grocery store or on a plane unless the situation was unique and allowed for it. Instead, participants repeatedly mentioned sharing their narratives with others with whom they had a close relationship, often others in the Christian community and family, because these audiences would not associate their actions as evangelistic.

Interestingly, at the same time that participants talked about trying to avoid appearing evangelistic to others, they talked still about sharing their stories in the hopes that their listeners would accept the Christian faith. In order to rationalize these opposing desires, participants seemed to negotiate this conflict by talking about *how* they share their narratives. Gus claimed:

> Everybody needs to belong and everybody needs to feel significant and everybody needs to be loved. That's where I start. I don't care what the context is, I don't care where I am. Umm, you know, it could be a brand new co-worker at work that's dealing with cancer. I, it's just like "Lord, what are you doing here? You love her. You love me. I know you love her. What's going on here?" So that's how I pursue [my conversion narrative]. So it's not always about here are the spiritual laws. It's more, how would He in this moment, what does He have for them? And then I try to align with that. And just be there.

Although the participants did not say so outright, the ways that they talked about sharing their narratives with others could ultimately be described as relationship-building. In other words, participants seemed to rationalize or excuse their reasons for sharing their faith, or for appearing evangelistic, with claims that their goal in sharing their faith stories was to build meaningful relationships with others. Gus' statement about loving people summarizes the ways that most of the participants talked about how their narratives functioned; as situations where they could build relationships with others through the sharing of their faith. Beth also stated that Christians should use their narratives to build relationships with others. She said:

> …Jesus taught us to disciple. He took twelve [people], and He discipled them, and He taught us to do that. I know for me, if I didn't have a mentor in my life, I don't know where I'd be, but God was so gracious to me to give me a mentor. Like, I am so grateful. So I just know that it's important for Christians to not be so private, and allow themselves to be open and to be mentored…

Because the majority of participants, like Gus and Beth, claimed their primary goal for sharing their narratives was to build relationships with others, I noted several ways that participants achieved this goal through the construction of their narratives and how they shared them with others. Once participants believed their goal of relationship building was achieved, they then explained that they could begin to help bring others to the Christian faith.

Summary and Conclusions

The ways that the participants talked about their faith narratives are significant in that they reveal the complex meanings these performances hold for their narrators. Although previous faith narrative researchers suggest that many of these stories are used for proselytizing purposes, based on my findings, I suggest that my participant's talk

regarding their faith narratives reveals that these stories just as often, if not more so, contribute to and reveal an individual's identity construction. This process of identity construction was revealed through three repeated themes. Each of these three themes contributed to the identity work process. First, participants often constructed their identities and their faith narratives in a before-and-after pattern. This before-and-after pattern is identity work in that participants used it to aid them in negotiating a sense of who they are by disassociating from who they were in the past and constructing who they are today, or, "I was this, and now I am this." Participant accounts suggested that the participants' identities were fluid in that the individuals were constantly changing and growing as their understanding of their faith progressed. However, individuals used the before-and-after pattern to help themselves construct and reconstruct their identities. This finding that the participants' identities were fluid and will likely change in the future supports Thompson et al's (2009) similar findings that third generation family members work to reinterpret and shape and reshape intergenerational legacies over time.

Second, beyond the pattern of the stories, the participants tell their stories as individuals who have a particular relationship that defines who they are. This belief that God transforms them is at the core of the participants' faith. Thus participants could only construct their own identities alongside their knowledge and understanding of who God is and how He changes them. In other words, the participants constructed a sense of self that is rooted in their relationships with God. That is, their stories are meant to establish that they are individuals who have a relationship with God.

Finally, participants engaged in identity work through the negotiation of their competing desires to share their faith with others while simultaneously avoiding

appearing evangelistic. These two desires might not seem compatible, yet participants desired both outcomes at the same time. Consequently, narrators engaged in identity work by synthesizing these two competing desires within their narratives. Particularly, participants used specific words and discourses to create identities that discussed their actions in terms relationship-building processes. These discourses enabled the participants to continue sharing their faith with others according to the Christian identity while simultaneously avoiding the negative stigma attached to the evangelist identity. Furthermore, because participants identified themselves as relationship-builders, participants constructed and shared their faith stories with others based on these identities. The next section addresses my findings in regard to my second research question that asked, how Christians think about their faith narratives.

Faith Narratives and Shared Identities

The participants' careful attention to constructing their identities through their faith narratives held further meaning beyond revealing who they are to their listeners. The significance of revealing their identities to others was also part of a commonly understood plan of the participants to build meaningful interpersonal relationships with their listeners. This relationship-building appeared to be the way that the participants made sense out of their need to avoid giving the impression of being evangelistic while at the same time fulfilling their obligation to spread the Christian faith with others. Through this relationship the participants hoped that their listeners would desire to join the Christian faith. For instance, Louise shared that one of her greatest hopes for her grandchildren when they heard her faith story was that they would see how some aspects of their own lives were playing out like hers, and because of this, they would feel the

need to be converted. Sharing their stories, therefore, was the participants' way of building relationships with their listeners. Patrick explains:

> …We're all pretty much the same. We have the same thoughts, the same doubts, the same everything. And I think when people hear about how something else has affected and worked in somebody else's life, I think that builds for lack of a better term, buy-in. I think it lends credibility, I think it gives some hope for other people that something can happen in their lives too.

Throughout their interview, participants like Patrick suggested a belief that building relationships between the narrators and their audiences through storytelling was the most persuasive tool for proselytizing. However, storytelling, the participants reasoned, is a more appropriate form of sharing their faith than outright evangelism techniques because sharing their faith through narratives, in their opinion, is less confrontational. This concept of building relationships through storytelling did appear to be accurate and an appropriate method for sharing the faith with others. Since a relationship was already built between the narrators and their listeners, participant accounts suggested that listeners were less likely to reject the narrators' stories. Patrick further explained:

> I think most people don't want to hear information. When they hear of something that's happened, it's a lot more powerful for them. It used to be, well, the facts. But I've seen that that doesn't really help a lot. And I think sometimes people are just polite listeners. I just, I'd much rather they hear some of my life experiences.

Patrick found that sharing facts about his faith in an aggressive manner only produced negative reactions in others, and could even inhibit a relationship with the listener. Instead, Patrick's quote suggests that less overt forms of sharing experiences was less confrontational and rarely produced negative reactions in the listener. Because Patrick was in the police force for many years, he had a repertoire of personal stories regarding others' personal transformations that he felt was more likely to convince others to join his faith versus an argument over beliefs. He shared one of those stories during his interview

where one of the worst criminals he had ever met transformed his life after he became a Christian. After sharing this story, Patrick stated:

> I can't give you any set of facts that's gonna make you believe in the transformative power of a faith in Jesus other than telling that story. To me stories carry a lot more weight and they're a lot more convincing.

Indeed, most of the participants spoke about the powerful nature of a story. Joe felt the same as the others. He knew his transformation from a person consumed with materialism and adultery to a person who is completely satisfied without material goods and secretive romantic relationships is a powerful argument for anyone to join the faith. A recurring statement from the participants was, "people can argue or disagree with facts and information, but who can argue with your story? Because it's *your* story." In other words, because the discussion was about the narrator's personal experiences, the conversation was less likely to produce an argument or disagreement about the faith. For individuals who identified themselves as shy and non-confrontational, like Hannah, sharing their faith in this way was advantageous because it was less anxiety-producing, not only for their audiences but for themselves as well.

In order to accomplish the task of building a relationship between the narrator and the listener, participants talked about constructing and sharing their narratives in specific ways that created intimacy and similarities between themselves and their listeners. The two most repeated ways that participants thought about their faith narratives were to build relationships based on their listeners' heart issues, and to make their stories as relatable as possible to the listeners.

Finding the heart issue

One of the ways that participants talked about constructing and sharing their faith narratives in order to build relationships was through finding and addressing the "heart issues" of their audiences. Carol explains:

> The reason that I am a believer isn't because intellectually I know that there's this teaching that, you know, this guy died and rose from the dead, and therefore He's my Savior. The reason that I became a believer is because that God touched my heart. Everything about the Kingdom of God is about your heart. And so, when we tell the stories, you first want to engage enough with the person, or enough with the Holy Spirit to know what's the heart issue? So you might start out talking about how Jesus gives you peace with someone long before you get to Jesus as the Savior because in their life right now, peace is the heart story.

Indeed, participant accounts illustrated that individuals believed that every person not only had emotional and physical needs, but spiritual needs as well. Patrick explained that, at some point in an individual's life, he or she begins to ask questions about what it is that he or she is living for. When these questions or needs are not being met, participants believe that the individual ultimately suffers some type of consequence, such as struggling with emotional or identity issues, substance abuse, or any other of the multiple consequences resulting from spiritual struggle. These struggles are what Carol meant by a person's heart issue.

Understanding the heart issue of the listener is helpful to the construction of their faith narratives, participants revealed, because the narrator can then use this information to tell his or her story in a way that addresses that struggle in their faith narrative. For instance, Carol explained:

> You know there are some themes that I think God tends to use me with. Peace is one of them. I'm not sure what that's all about but it seems to come up a lot. I couldn't believe in Jesus until it met my need of understanding the Son of God part. I'll talk to people and maybe their need is, they need peace in their life. Or maybe their need is they need healing from an abusive family situation, or maybe

> their need is… they live in a culture that has never experienced real kindness. And so when you talk with people, you kind of just have to think or ask God, "what is the need?" and so then you can take almost any Bible story, and tell it in a way that meets that need.

Patrick similarly stated:

> Part of it is… I mean I look at what's happened in my life since I really started believing, I want that for other people. I really think we all share the same … same things. People aren't that much different. And I know that if I've had some miserable times in my life where I really questioned what the future holds, or questioned what's goin' on with God and where's God in this? I know other people are experiencing the same thing. And so I just hate to see potential gone. And when you see people that are kind of mired in circumstance, I just want them to have the same joy and confidence I have. That's one of the reasons I share it.

And Beth said, "Everybody I talk to, everybody I pray with, because God lines you up with the right people, they are suffering with fear too and a lack of trust, a lack of faith." Since participants believed that everyone struggles with heart issues, they used their interactions with their audiences during their faith narratives to discover their listeners' heart issues. Participants then constructed their own stories in ways that would address a similar heart issues that occurred in their own lives. As a result of constructing their stories to address similar struggles, participants believed they were building relationships between themselves and their listeners.

Participant accounts revealed that their faith narratives are composed of similar struggles to their listeners' heart issues. However, in the narrator's case, the struggle is overcome with God's help. For instance, Louise talked about how she had shared her stories about fear with the person sitting next to her during a turbulent airline flight overseas. Similarly, Joe could reference his past materialism when sharing his narrative with someone consumed with wanting more material goods. Carol summarized this concept of meeting the listener's needs with the narrator's performances. She said:

> You know there's probably about five themes I can tell out of my conversion story. Um, and so they tend, you know, when I tell the whole things it's pretty long. But I can tell pieces of it in two or three minutes just based on what I think the person needs or what God's telling me.

As Carol's quote suggests, participants knew that they needed to be aware of several different struggles within their faith experiences in order to be able to address the variety of struggles that they encountered with their listeners. This explains Carol's prior knowledge about the themes she is able to share with any of her listeners. But as Carol's statement also implies, the way these themes or struggles are shared is very specific to each listener. Therefore, most of the participants could not actually describe how they would share their stories outside of the actual situations in which they were shared since they did not have any information about with whom they were sharing their narratives. This concept of constructing their narratives specifically to their audiences played a significant role in influencing the construction of the narratives and how participants shared them with others.

Relatability

Another factor that influenced the ways that participants talked about the construction of their narratives and the ways that they are shared them with others is the relatability of their stories to their audiences. Although participants could relay a similar struggle in their lives as their listeners, individuals were also aware that their faith experiences could alienate listeners who were either not yet Christians or who did not have a similar faith experience.

Since participants' faith experiences could be extremely dramatic, participants thought about, and actively made choices to make their transformations and identities as

relatable as possible to their listeners. Patrick explained how detrimental a faith narrative could be if constructed and shared otherwise. He said:

> It's interesting because I think sometimes as a church body, or as even in individual or particular ministry sharing stories, sometimes [stories] can be so over the top that your average Joe can't relate. I always used to joke about that because you'd hear these, "I was a successful six figure businessman, and all of a sudden, God told me one day to quit my job and sell my company and spend all of my money in Tibet on a mountaintop, and then I got the dangsy-dangsy fever and I almost died, but I saw a vision of Jesus standing there saying you need to go and be a shrimp fisherman. So amazingly I came down from the mountain and this guy from Bubba Gump was just happened to be there and we went and used all our shrimp proceeds to feed the poor." A story like that is real and they're live, but they do the average person very little good. So I like to hear real stories about real people that have taken some steps. So it's something that's real and something that's authentic.

Other participant accounts reflected Patrick's sentiments. It seems that often individuals, groups, and churches use these dramatic and powerful stories to create a sense of shock and awe that they believe will draw in a larger audience. However, many of the participants agreed that relatable stories were more persuasive and influential. Because participants viewed relatable stories as more effective in accomplishing shared identities, the participants argued that stories should be constructed in practice with language that is 1) culturally appropriate and 2) inclusive towards the audiences.

First, participants talked about being aware of social and cultural influences that might inhibit their listener's understanding of the story. For example, Carol lives close to an African American community and shares her narratives with them. How she shares her narrative with that specific culture, Carol argues, is much different than how she shares her narrative with European American individuals. In explanation, Carol said:

> I talk about being submitted to the will of God. That I'm a person that wants to be submitted to the will of God. Because it's more culture-friendly in that particular culture. In other situations [with European Americans] I would say that I am a person that longs to be in God's presence. In the African community, it's

> very important to know where you're located, your relationship in the family. So my African version, I say I'm the oldest daughter in my family, and I would start out by telling my position in my family.

In this way, Carol believed she shared her narrative in a way that was meaningful for people of a different culture than her own. Ultimately, participants believed that understanding their audiences' culture was important because sharing a narrative using language and concepts that are culturally specific could either include or exclude the listeners.

Therefore, part of understanding these cultural specifics was evidenced also by the participants' concern about not speaking "Christanese" to others outside of the Christian community. In other words, similar to other cultures, the Christian community adopted language and concepts that are specific to the Christian culture. For instance, although Carol worked in the financial industry for over thirty years, she explained, never did she hear the word "sanctification" used in that setting. However, the same word is familiar to, and used often by Christians. Carol explained:

> Christianese is the language we talk in church. We say words that we never say out in the street. Sanctification. I've worked in the financial industry for over thirty years, I've never used that word in the financial industry… I think sometimes if we hang out in the church too long, you almost have to learn this Christianese language in order to understand what we're talking about.

Ruth, a retired widow, felt similarly, however she argued that certain words and concepts, such as "surrender" must be included more frequently in narrative performances with other Christians, since this is a major concept necessary to the Christian faith experience. Ruth and Carol's examples show how complex and important specific language and phrases are to faith narratives in that using "Christianese" can unite Christian individuals by evoking a shared identity. However, the participants acknowledged also that their use

of this language is detrimental if it excludes those who are not of the Christian faith. Ultimately participants felt that narrators should be extremely careful about the type of language they use to make the story as clear and understandable for the listeners as possible, while not using culturally specific language that might exclude certain audiences from the narrative.

One final factor which contributed to the ways in which individuals thought about, constructed and shared their faith narratives with others is the participants' beliefs about who was in control of these stories and the situations in which they are shared.

Control of Faith Narratives

One of the most profound concepts revealed through participant accounts showed that the participants felt a powerful loss of control during the instances when they shared their narratives. For instance, many participants like Hannah, a missionary, stated that if they based sharing their stories on their shy and introverted personalities, their stories would never be shared. Indeed, many of the participants mentioned that sharing their narratives sometimes can be anxiety producing because of not knowing how to approach the stories in certain situations and not knowing how their listeners will react. Because of this, participants shared often that they felt outside of their comfort zone when sharing their narratives. Thus, I concluded that sharing their narratives was not associated with being dependent on the participants' personalities or feelings of comfort and security. Instead, something else was pushing these individuals to share their stories. According to the participants, that something was the Holy Spirit. Carol explains:

> The Holy Spirit is a great encourager. He's kind of like Tigger on steroids. I mean he gets to be encouraging, and I've just learned over a lifetime, I mean it's just easier to say "Yes" and do it. It can be… I'm sitting there minding my own business, not even wanting to share, and God plucks the situation right down in

> front of me, that I would be totally blind to miss. And it's kind of like, "Okay, are you going to engage it or not?" And um, I've made enough "not engagements" to know that there's a bit of a price to pay sometimes. (such as?) God does sometimes put situations in your life where He really wants you to engage because it will grow you. And our God is relentless about wanting you to grow. And if you say "no" then you kind of have to start back at ground zero and go through that trip again. And He'll give you another example, but He won't quit…

Beth also spoke about the Holy Spirit's role in why she shares her narrative. She said:

> The Holy Spirit, um… lets you know. The Holy Spirit is alive in us and He will quicken your heart. You know in the Bible it says, "Don't even think about what you're gonna say, because the Holy Spirit is going to quicken you" and so you'll be with someone and talking to them and all of a sudden the Holy Spirit will say "Share that one story" and there's a reason for it.

Therefore, participants made sense of why they shared their narratives in terms of talking about their experiences as ones of obligation and obedience. For instance, Fred claimed: "I'm just doing what God wants me to do." These statements reflect how participants often felt out of control as to when, how, and why they would share their stories with others. When asked how they knew when the Holy Spirit wanted them to share their stories, participants used descriptive nouns like, it was an "unction" or a "conviction" to explain how they felt the Holy Spirit's prodding. And as Carol suggested, participants understood that there would be consequences if they did not obey the Holy Spirit's command.

Interestingly, although participants spoke of some anxiety when prodded to share their stories with others, more often they talked about feeling relieved by the Holy Spirit's control because much of the responsibility was taken off of their shoulders. For instance, Fred stated:

> I'm always trying to throw out some seeds everywhere I go, because I read not that long ago… I have a daily scripture book and I read not that long ago that God talks about taking care of the soil because seeds cannot grow in hard soil, but God says take care of the land as I do, and your seeds will grow. So that's why I've

> been trying to just keeping throwing the seeds out there. And I read elsewhere in the Bible, that God says "go tell people about me, and let me do the work after that". For me not to worry about their walk with God, but just start uh… it's like leading a horse to water, but you can't make it drink, that kind of thing.

In explanation, the participants made sense of their responsibility to share their narratives by claiming that their role was not to get their listeners to believe what they were saying, but simply to plant a "seed of faith." Fred's statement illustrates that although participants are knowledgeable about ways of sharing their story to get a more positive reaction from the audiences, ultimately the individuals are unconcerned with whether their listeners believed the narratives or joined the faith at that moment. Granting all this, participant accounts revealed that the sharing of the narrative still functioned as a guide to salvation for the audience. Whether or not the listener became saved after hearing the faith narratives then depended on the work of the Holy Spirit.

Summary and Conclusions

An analysis of the results suggests that participants engage in identity work throughout their narratives. Specifically, the tensions and contradictions that riddled the participants' narratives are what ultimately aided the participants in constructing their identities. In other words, participants constructed and reconstructed their identities with each storytelling experience by negotiating the tensions and contradictions they felt and made during the act of sharing their stories with others. One of the most prominent tensions was the participants' simultaneous desires to share their faith stories according to their Christian identities while avoiding appearing evangelistic to their listeners. Participants engaged in identity work by discussing their actions of sharing their stories with others in terms of relationship-building processes.

Since participants identified themselves as individuals who build intimate relationships with others by sharing their faith stories, their identity work influenced the ways in which they shared those stories. First, participants shared their stories in ways that would build intimacy with their listeners by finding and addressing their listeners' heart issues in their own narratives. Second, participants constructed their narratives in ways that would portray who they are and their experiences as something their listeners could experience. Finally, participants talked about themselves as individuals who are not in control of the ways that they share their narratives. Rather, participants attributed the control of their faith narratives to the Holy Spirit. As a result, it seems participants avoided taking responsibility for their narratives by explaining that they are individuals who are not in control of the situations in which their stories are shared.

The results regarding the ways that participants share their narratives are interesting because, although participants identified themselves as individuals who are not in control of their stories, they also made active decisions about how they shared their stories (i.e. addressing their listeners' heart issues, making the stories relatable to their audiences). In other words, participants controlled how they shared their stories while simultaneously claiming they were not in control of the storytelling experience. These contradictions do not necessarily falsify the participants and their storytelling experiences. Instead, the contradictions reveal the complexity of identity work and its influence on the ways that individuals construct and share their stories.

While negotiating their identity tensions in this way might have worked for the participants, it is possible that to their listeners the participants' actions still appeared evangelistic. I am not implying that the participants' were portraying 'fake' selves, but

rather that they believed that their communication processes were not evangelistic, but rather relationship-building techniques. Whether the participants' listeners agreed that the narrators were not evangelistic by sharing their faith stories remains unanswered. Further studies are needed to discern how listeners feel when they are audience to faith narratives. Regardless of how listeners might feel when told faith stories by Christians, the ways that participants negotiated their competing desires during the identity construction in their narratives holds significance for researchers, and the community at large. These implications will be now be discussed in the final chapter of this study.

CHAPTER FIVE:

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The goal of this study was to better understand the ways everyday Christians use faith to construct their identities, and consequently, how individuals construct and share their narratives with others. Through a review of the relevant literature for this thesis, I found that American culture has become less tied to religious institutions and more religiously diverse (U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, 2008). At the same time, researchers notice changes in the ways that individuals talk about their faith with others (Brereton, 1991). While there are many different forms of religious talk, I chose to pay particular attention to faith narratives due to their longevity in the Christian faith and their subtlety and indirectness.

While the literature reveals that telling faith stories serves several functions, the research is narrowly focused in theory and practice. Indeed, the literature pertaining to faith narratives is often conducted through textual analyses of autobiographies of high profile, yet outlying, individuals. Researchers yet have to discover how faith narratives function for the "everyday" Christian. Additionally, this narrow focus on participant populations has resulted in a lack of knowledge on how everyday Christians use their narratives to construct and communicate their identities to others; a concept which has been studied in other types of narrative research.

This study used interviews to examine the discourses surrounding the construction of identity in faith narratives and how these narratives consequently are constructed and shared with others. In response to my first research question which asked how do Christians' faith narratives influence their identity construction, participant accounts

revealed three common themes which influenced individuals' identity constructions. First, participants talked about the construction of their identities in a before-and-after pattern. Thus, they structured their narratives with a 1) before stage where individuals disassociated from a past identity, 2) a stage where an identity transformation occurred, and 3) an after stage where individuals constructed a present and future identity for themselves. The second identity theme revealed that participants' understandings of their identities were closely tied to their understandings of their faith and God's identity. In other words, participants identified themselves as individuals who are in a relationship with God, and therefore, as their understandings of their faith and who God is grew, so did their understandings of themselves and who God was "molding" them to be. The third theme that contributed to individuals' identity constructions was a struggle between their understanding of who they are as Christians and the subsequent obligation for them to share their faith with others, and their desires to avoid appearing evangelistic when they share their stories. These three themes greatly contributed to the ways that participants constructed their identities. However, these three themes also influenced the ways that the participants thought about, constructed and shared their stories with others.

In regard to my second research question which asked how do Christians share their faith narratives with others, I found that participants' identity constructions influenced vastly the ways that individuals shared their narratives with others. In other words, because participants identified themselves with the Christian faith through their narratives, but simultaneously desired to avoid appearing evangelistic to their audiences, participants negotiated this conflict by regarding their faith narratives as relationship-building processes. As a result, participants talked about using their narratives to build

relationships with their listeners. Once a relationship was built, participants then hoped their listeners would join the Christian faith.

Participant accounts subsequently revealed three themes which influenced the ways in which they shared their faith narratives with others. First, participants thought about their stories as relationship-building process where they would build intimacy with their listeners by finding and addressing the heart issues of their audiences. Participants suggested this was the most effective way of building relationships with others through their narratives. Second, participants suggested an understanding on their part that the language and concepts created through their faith culture included or excluded certain audiences. In order to help their audiences understand their identities and experiences, participants thought about sharing their narratives in ways that would be most relatable to their listeners. Finally, part of their Christian identity included a submission to the control of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, participants thought about the act of constructing and sharing their narratives as something outside of their control. Instead, individuals attributed the control of the construction and sharing of their narratives to the Holy Spirit. Consequently, participants often were unable to describe how they would share their narratives without knowledge of the context, audience, and direction of the Holy Spirit which were different in each storytelling event. Interestingly, this claim that they are individuals who are not in control of their storytelling events was made alongside other claims that they make specific decisions about how their narratives are shared.

In this final chapter, I examine the implications of my findings as they relate to both theory and practice. Following these implications, I discuss limitations to my study, and offer suggestions for future research.

Theoretical Implications

One of the themes that emerged in this study is that the sharing of faith narratives with others is not straightforward; it is a complex and nuanced process. Some of the complexities that emerged in the data involved particular tensions which needed to be negotiated during the sharing of the narratives. Therefore, the sharing of faith narratives might be usefully viewed through the lens of dialectics: a theory devoted to understanding how individuals negotiate tensions within relationships. The results of this study hold implications for theories of identity constructionism and the dialectical tensions of interpersonal relationships. First, I discuss how dialectical tensions manifested in the ways that participants talked about their faith narratives contribute to how individuals perceive their identity and how individuals negotiate and sustain the life of their close relationships. Following this discussion, I offer a suggestion for better understanding the role of faith narratives using these theoretical implications.

The results regarding the ways in which the participants made sense of and talked about sharing their faith narratives illustrated several contradictions inherent in sharing one's faith with others. Past scholars used to view contradictions or inconsistencies as a confusion or inaccuracy on the part of the narrator; concepts which needed to be "smoothed out" by choosing one answer as the true and accurate account (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Today, however, academicians have moved from the dualistic, either/or approach to contradictions and instead view opposites and inconsistencies as *dialectics*, or tensions of two opposing forces that can coexist simultaneously and define each other through repeated interactions (Baxter, 2004). Concepts, like intimacy and distance, may seem to be the exact opposite of each other as Miller (2005) suggests,

however, one can desire simultaneously to be both intimate with and distant from their romantic partner. Furthermore, the intimacy-distance example showcases how two concepts mutually define one another. Miller states:

> Indeed, to a large extent your desire for each of these is defined by your experience with the other. You appreciate and desire intimacy because of loneliness and disconnection you have experienced in the past, and you want to maintain a separateness because in the past you may have experienced a smothering kind of closeness (pp. 197-198).

Furthermore, the more interactions one has with another, the more the tensions are defined and redefined within and outside of a relationship. While intimacy/closeness is just one example of a contradiction found in interpersonal relationships, the list of dialectical tensions is potentially unending.

Previously, researchers applied theories of dialectics solely to the realm of interpersonal relationships. For instance, Rawlins (1983) is well known for his work examining dialectical tensions in close friendships. Dialectical tensions were and are researched in the context of families (Yerby, 1995) and romantic relationships (Braithwaite & Baxter, 1995). More recently, however, the research scope has widened to include alternate relationships as well, such as one's relationship with their organization. For instance, Kirby, et al. (2006) studied the negotiation of university employees' spirituality with the secular environment in which they work. Ultimately, Baxter and Montgomery (1996) argue that dialectics can be studied in the context of any type of relationship, where a relationship is defined as a "self-hyphen-other."

This study's participant dialogues incorporated several different relationships characterized by dialectical tensions, including the narrator-listener's relationship, the narrator's relationship with his or her Christian community, and the narrator's

relationship with God. Although numerous dialectical tensions were present in the participant accounts, I found two main dialectical tensions in each of the differing interpersonal relationships: 1) autonomy-connection and 2) affection-instrumentality.

The first dialectical tension found in all three relationships is the autonomy versus connection dialectic. This dialectic is a tension between our desire to remain independent from others while at the same time desiring to be connected with others (Baxter, 2004). One major example of the autonomy-connection dialectic was revealed through the ways that the participants talked about needing to feel connected to and a part of their Christian community, while at the same time desiring to be unique and different from others. As a result, individuals either conformed to their common understandings of how they should think, speak, act and share their narratives with others, or they made conscious decisions to appear unique and different from their community. In other words, the autonomy versus connection dialectic was revealed through the participants' concern over whether they should conform to their Christian community's standards of sharing their faith with others while at the same time making their story unique and personal. For some, this was evidenced by their attempt to follow the before-and-after pattern of constructing their identities even though they had always identified with the Christian faith. Others attempted to remain connected by using culturally specific language while simultaneously sharing very personal parts of their story to make themselves appear unique. Furthermore, the participants' relationship with God was characterized by tensions between autonomy and connection. In the data participants showcased this dialectic through their claims that God was in control of their narrative performances and yet participants often spoke about conscious decisions on their part about the construction

of their narratives in practice. This dialectical tension in all three relationships, narrator-listener, narrator-Christian community and narrator-God, greatly influenced the ways that the participants negotiated and constructed their identities through their faith stories and also influenced the ways that these stories were shared with others.

Another major dialectic illustrated in the participant accounts revealed a tension between affection and instrumentality. This dialectic is a tension between engaging in a relationship as a means-to-an-end (instrumentality) and as an end-in-itself (affection) (Baxter, 1988). In the most simple of terms, the affection-instrumentality dialectic addresses a person's simultaneous desire to have a relationship with another simply because that he or she cares for that person, while desiring also the relationship to fulfill a purpose or benefit one's self, such as through receiving help with homework from a friend. As with all dialectics, this dialectic is quite complex when broken down even further. The types of affection and instrumentality found by researchers are endless. Furthermore, neither concept is mutually exclusive. Rawlins (1992) explains that affection from a friend can actually become the beneficial goal of engaging in a relationship over time. Finally, within affection-instrumentality dialectic, several other tensions occur, such as generosity versus reciprocity and spontaneity versus obligation.

The affection-instrumentality dialectic was prominent in all three types of relationships in this study. In terms of the narrators' relationship with their listeners, participants greatly struggled with wanting to be friends with and loving their listeners just because God told them to, and developing a relationship with their listeners as a means to bring them to the Christian faith and to fulfill their responsibility as a Christian. Furthermore, participant accounts suggested that individuals engaged in relationships

with others in their Christian community for love and support while simultaneously desiring those relationships to feel connected and supported in their faith. Finally, participant accounts revealed a similar struggle in their relationship with God where they simply wanted God's love and affection while desiring simultaneously salvation and growth through God's teachings.

Both of these dialectical tensions appeared to be closely tied to one of the most prominent tensions revealed in the results: the participants' desires to avoid appearing evangelistic while at the same time fulfilling their obligation to spread their Christian faith. Essentially, participants felt challenged with the task of sharing a narrative in the hopes of bringing more people to the faith while simultaneously wanting to avoid appearing as those they were proselytizing to others. These two competing goals were negotiated through the ways that participants actively made decision about how their stories were shared in practice.

Although this dialectic, and the others described above, appear to make sharing faith narratives an extremely complex process, these dialectics are also, as dialectic theory suggests, what makes these performances meaningful, and worthy of study. Therefore, unlike previous notions that contradictions are inaccuracies and detrimental to relationships, faith narrative scholars should view these contradictions as necessary active negotiations with others to make sense out of the narrator's experiences. Furthermore, the dialectical tensions that characterized the participants' faith narratives also provide insight into the ways that participants narratively negotiate and construct their identities. The fluidity and complexity of individuals' identities appear to be an effect of the dialectical tensions which inhabit the stories they tell about themselves.

Pragmatic Applications

In addition to theoretical implications for faith narrative research, this study also provides numerous suggestions for both Christian individuals and churches in regard to better understanding the socialization practices and decision-making processes surrounding faith narratives. Previous research illustrates not only that individuals use language to construct their realities, but also that individuals are socialized by others through language to behave in accordance with community standards. This study supports previous research in that the participants constructed their realities through their faith narratives. Furthermore, participants shared how their faith communities influenced the decisions they made in regards to the ways that they shared their stories. In the following section, I provide suggestions to both Christians and churches for ways to better prepare individuals for sharing their faith narratives with others.

Challenging Evangelism's Stigma

Participant accounts revealed that there is an appropriate way and time to share a faith narrative with others. Furthermore, misinterpreting or ignoring the appropriate way and time to perform one's narrative results in negative reactions from the listener towards the narrator and the faith in general. Although many programs dedicated to teaching people how to share their faith are offered both locally and nationally, participant accounts suggest that most "everyday" Christians do not partake in these programs, but rather learn how to share their faith through their Christian community. Because one's community plays such a big role in influencing individuals' thoughts and behaviors, several suggestions may help improve the ways in which churches socialize their members to share the faith with others.

My first recommendation for churches is to consider the ways in which the church talks about sharing the faith. First, churches should not relegate "evangelism" programs to interested-only parties. Instead, churches should discuss evangelism and sharing the faith in church services and other events in which the "everyday" Christian may attend. Furthermore, while participant accounts revealed that faith holds several functions for the narrator, participants often spoke about constructing their performances in ways that would avoid appearing evangelistic. Others felt that evangelism was a gift or personality trait with which only certain people are blessed. This concept of evangelism as a gift or personality trait persuaded those individuals who did not feel gifted in that way not to share their faith with others. While I am not encouraging individuals to try and be someone who they are not, I suggest that the sharing of faith narratives similarly will come under attack if the Christian community does not start discussing the concept of evangelism and what it means to them. In other words, if sharing faith narratives is one of the few remaining ways in which Christians choose to talk about their faith, churches must begin changing the ways that their members perceive evangelism and sharing the faith with others.

Therefore, I recommend that all churches, those that claim to be evangelistic and those that do not, take an active role in discovering how their members feel about the concept of evangelism and address those stigmas that may arise through the discussion. Churches can then discuss what they mean by the concept of evangelism and why the term has produced negative reactions. Specifically, churches should address the concept of evangelism in more positive terms and in a variety of ways in order to challenge the stigma attached to sharing one's faith. Every church must be evangelistic in some regard

or else the church becomes a closed community. As participant accounts revealed, however, very few Christians claim to be evangelistic. Yet allowing only a few people to take over the role of evangelism creates even more challenges outside of the Christian community because only a few voices, and consequently viewpoints, are being shared. One of the participants perfectly explained what I suggest. Carol claimed:

> God called us all to be fishers of men. We are all to share our faith, the reason why we have this joy, and this hope. Now… the gift of evangelism is a wonderful grace for the church. It helps expand the church. But statistically, if you look at people that we would call teachers, preachers, evangelists, statistically, they only bring in two to three percent of the population. The rest of it is up to us normal believers. And um… God calls us all to be evangelistic. You know you can be evangelistic by going to the new neighbor that, you don't know whether they're a believer or not, and help them shovel their walks. That's being evangelistic. You know, because in that process you can find out if they are a believer, no? God will take whatever gifts that He's given you, and if He's given you the gift that you're most comfortable operating is the gift of helps, He's going to allow you to do that in way that will bring people into the church. Because that's His goal.

Therefore, in order to avoid only a few people sharing their faith, Christians must first overcome the stigma attached to evangelism and sharing their faith with others. Furthermore, through this conversation churches can discuss what is an appropriate way, by their standards, of sharing one's faith with others.

Providing Relatable and Diverse Examples

My second recommendation for churches focuses on the specific examples of faith-sharing the church provides to its members. Participant accounts revealed that listening to others performing their narratives in church is one of the most influential ways in which a church socializes its members on how to share their own narratives. Unfortunately, participant accounts also illustrated that many churches negatively impact Christians by not providing a variety of faith narratives. Participants discussed how detrimental it is if only one type of faith narrative is performed at church. For instance,

many of the participants who did not have a date and time conversion narrative because they had always perceived themselves as Christians at one point in their lives or another felt excluded from the Christian community because they did not have what they thought was an appropriate conversion narrative. Others who did not have a dramatic before and after experience also mentioned feeling inferior and excluded from the Christian community at some point in their lives because their conversion did not look like their understanding of the typical conversion narrative. At the most extreme level, Patrick mentioned knowing someone who felt he had to actually engage in sinful acts so that his conversion narrative would seem acceptable to others.

Due to the detriment that can be caused if churches do not provide enough variety of faith narratives, I suggest that churches employ a variety of different faith narrative examples to enable the greatest relatability to all congregational members. This includes providing faith narratives of individuals who have always considered themselves a Christian, as well as performances of those who do not have a specific date and time conversion experience. While highly dramatic narratives are entertaining and impactful, stories without a specific date and time and stories of the "lifelong Christian" seem to be more relatable forms of the conversion narrative, and should be meaningful for a larger number of congregants than the highly dramatic story.

Limitations

While great insight was gathered during this study, as with any research, this study also contained limitations. First, while convenience sampling allowed for a timely gathering of participants for the study, it also inhibited the participant demographics to an extent. None of the participants was under the age of 33, and thus, younger generations

were not represented in the participant sample. Furthermore, all of the participants were European American, middle to upper class individuals living in the suburbs of a large Midwestern metropolis. Therefore, participant demographics were not extremely diversified.

Second, this study was limited because it was focused within one church setting, since all of the participants were gathered from the same church. Because of this, much of the data set is specific to the congregation of this church. Additional studies would benefit from gathering participants from multiple church environments, including different denominational alliances and makeups, to decipher whether an individuals' church membership influences the ways in which they are socialized to talk about their faith with others.

Future Directions and Conclusion

This study elicits some future directions for researchers interested in faith narratives. First, because contemporary American society is shifting to a culture where individuals may be talking about their faith differently, future studies should examine how younger generations view talking about their faith, and, whether younger individuals are sharing faith narratives similarly to the ways this study suggests older generations do. Additionally, this study revealed that, contrary to previous faith narrative research, most faith narratives happen within the church setting. While this study touched on several functions these faith narratives play in the Christian community, future studies would benefit from further exploring each of these functions in greater detail. Furthermore, one of the most profound findings of this study revealed a constant tension for the participants between being obedient to the Holy Spirit's direction and making conscious decisions

about when and how to share their conversion narratives. Future faith narrative research should also examine this paradox in greater detail, and how this tension creates meaning for the narrator's and their Christian community.

In conclusion, I created this study out of a personal curiosity about how and why Christians talk about their faith in a society where faith talk is changing. In order to better understand this, I questioned how faith narratives contribute to an individual's identity construction, and consequently, how faith narratives are thought about and shared in practice. The results of this study suggest that participants negotiate several dialectical tensions in order to construct their identities. These identities are furthermore closely related to the participants' understandings of God's identity and how He is changing them over time. Additionally, participants used their narratives as an identity construction process in order to imply shared identities with their listeners. As a result, through interactions with their audiences, participants found and addressed their audiences' heart issues within their own narratives as a way to convince their listeners to joining the Christian faith. Since each situation in which a narrative is shared is different, results further indicated that Christian dialogues regarding faith narratives are riddled with dialectical tensions and paradoxes that must be negotiated and re-negotiated during each instance in which the narrative is shared.

This study helps us better understand the ways in which Christians share their faith with others. As contemporary Christians become more apprehensive about sharing their faith, researchers must continue to explore and understand the ways that the Christian community socializes its members to talk about their faith with others both inside and outside of the faith, as well as the meaning created from these dialogues.

REFERENCES

Archakis, a., & Tzanne, A. (2005). Narrative positioning and the construction of situated identities. *Narrative Inquiry, 15*(2), 267-291.

Astely, J. (2004). *Exploring god-talk: Using language in religion.* London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd.

Ayometzi, C. (2007). Storying as becoming: Identity through the telling of conversion. In M. Bamberg, A. De Fina and D. Shiffrin (Eds.), *Selves and identities in narrative and discourse* (pp. 40-70).

Barone, J., & Switzer, J. (1995). *Interviewing art and skill*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Baxter, L. (1988). A dialectical perspective on communication strategies in relationship development. In S. Duck (Ed.), *A Handbook of Personal Relationships* (pp. 257-273). New York: Wiley.

Baxter, L., & Braithwaite, D. (2002). Performing marriage: Marriage renewal rituals as cultural performances. *Southern Communication Journal*, *67*, 94-109.

Baxter, L., & Montgomery, B. (1996). *Relating: Dialogues and dialectics.* New York: Guilford Press.

Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

Brereton, V. (1991). *From sin to salvation: Stories of women's conversions, 1800 to the present*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Chatham-Carpenter, A. (2006). Internal self-esteem: God as symbolic interactionism's "significant other." *Journal of Communication and Religion,* 103-126.

Clabough, R. (2011). Texas judge: no prayer or religious words at medina valley graduation. *The New American.* Retrieved January 14, 2012, from http://thenewamerican.com/usnews/constitution/7720-texas-judge-no-prayer-or-religious-words-at-medina-valley-graduation-

Comello, M. (2009). William james on "possible selves": Implications for studying identity in communication contexts. *Communication Theory, 19*, 337-350.

Cote, J. (2006). Identity studies: How close are we to developing a social science of identity?—An appraisal of the field. *Identity: An International Journal of Theory and Research, 6(1)*, 3-25.

Crouse, J. S. (2010). We don't believe; Doubt doubles during last two decades. *The Washington Times.* Retrieved February 1, 2011, from http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2010/dec/9/we-dont-believe/

Denzin, N. & Lincoln, N. (2008). *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials* (2 ed.). London: Sage.

Dumanig, F., David, M., & Dealwis, C. (2011). Conversion narratives and construction of identity among Christians in Malaysia. *Multilingua, 30*, 319-331.

Eisenberg, E. (1998). Flirting with meaning. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology, 17(1)*, 97-108.

Eisenberg, E. (2001). Building a mystery: Toward a new theory of communication and identity. *Journal of Communication, 51*(3), 534-552.

Fisher, W. (1984). Narration as a human communication paradigm: The case of public moral argument. *Communication Monographs, 51*, 1-22.

Gergen, K. J. (1985). The social constructionist movement in modern psychology. *American Psychologist, 40*, 266-275.

Glaser, B. & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Piscataway: Transaction Publishers.

Gorden, R. (1992). *Basic interview skills*. Itasca: F.E. Peacock.

Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. New York, NY: Doubleday.

Griffin, C. (1990). The rhetoric of form in conversion narratives. *Quarterly Journal of Speech, 76*, 152-163.

Hallberg, L. (2006). The "core category" of grounded theory: Making constant comparisons. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-being, 1*, 141-148.

Harding, S. (1987). Convicted by the holy spirit: The rhetoric of fundamental baptist conversion. *American Ethnologist, 14*(1), 167-181.

Howell, B., & Dorr, R. (2007). Evangelical pilgrimage: The language of short-term missions. *Journal of Communication and Religion*, 236-265.

Jacobs, A. (2008). *Looking before and after: Testimony and the christian life.* Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

James, W. (1978). The divided self and conversion. In W. E. Conn (Ed.), *Conversion: Perspectives on personal and social transformation* (pp. 148-168). New York, NY: Alba House.

Kirby et al. (2006). The jesuit difference (?): Narratives of negotiating spiritual values and secular practices. *Communication Studies, 57*(1), 87-105.

Koerber, A, & McMichael, L. (2008). Qualitative sampling methods: A primer for technical communicators." *Journal of Business and Technical Communication 22*(4), 454-473.

Kuhn, T. (2006). A 'demented work ethic' and a 'lifestyle firm': Discourse, identity, and workplace time commitments. *Organization Studies 27*(9), 1339-1358.

Kuhn, T., Golden, A., Jorgenson, J., Buzzanell, P., Berkelaar, B., Kisselburgh, L., & Cruz, D. (2008). Cultural discourses and discursive resources for meaning/ful work: Constructing and disrupting identities in contemporary capitalism**.** *Management Communication Quarterly*, *22*, 162-171.

Langellier, K. M. (1989). Personal narratives: Perspectives on theory and research. *Text and Performance Quarterly, 9*(4), 243-276.

Langellier, K. & Peterson, E. (2004). *Storytelling in daily life: Performing narrative.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Lindlof, T. & Taylor, B. (2002). *Qualitative communication research methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Lwin, S. M. (2010). Capturing the dynamics of narrative development in an oral storytelling performance: A multimodal perspective. *Language and Literature, 19*(4), 357-377.

McLennan, D. (1996). Rhetoric and the legitimation process: The rebirth of charles colson. *The Journal of Communication and Religion, 19(1)*, 5-12.

Maruna, S., Wilson, L., & Curran, K. (2006). Why god is often found behind bars: Prison conversion and the crisis of self-narrative. *Research in Human Development, 3(2&3)*, 161-184.

Mayer, J., & Richardson, B. (2010). From “living hell” to “new normal”: Self-identification strategies revealed in the development of personal narratives among female former sex workers. *Journal of Communication and Religion*, 56-86.

Meacham, J. (2009). The end of christian America. *Newsweek, 153*(15). Retrieved February 1, 2011, from http://www.newsweek.com/2009/04/03/the-end-of-christian-america.html

Gluesing, J.. (2009) Identity in a virtual world: The coevolution of technology, work and lifestyle. In S. Kedla & T. Wallace (Eds.), *Mobile Work, Mobile Lives: Cultural Accounts of Lived Experiences* (pp. 70-88). Danvers, MA: American Anthropological Association.

Miller, K. (2005). *Communication theories: Perspectives, processes, and contexts.* New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Raskin, J. D. (2002). Constructivism in psychology: Personal construct psychology, radical constructivism, and social constructionism. In J. D. Raskin & S. K. Bridges (Eds.), *Studies in meaning: Exploring constructivist psychology* (pp. 1-25). New York: Pace University Press.

Rawlins, W. (1992). *Friendship matters: Communication, dialectics, and the life course.* New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.

Redman, P. (2005). The narrative formation of identity revisited: Narrative construction, agency, and unconscious. *Narrative Inquiry, 15*(1), 25-44.

Schiappa, E. (1993). Burkean tropes and kuhnian science: A social constructionist perspective on language and reality. *Journal of Advanced Composition 13*(2), 401-22.

Stark, R. (2008). *What americans really believe*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press.

Stromberg, P. (1993). *Language and self-transformation: A study of the christian conversion narrative.* New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Taylor, S. (2006). Narrative as construction and discursive resource. *Narrative Inquiry, 16*(1), 94-102.

The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (2008). *U.S. religious landscape survey.* Retrieved February 1, 2011, from http://religions.pewforum.org/reports

The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (2010). *Religion among the millenials.* Retrieved February 1, 2011, from http://religions.pewforum.org/reports

Thompson, B., Kellas, J., Soliz, J., Thompson, J., Epp, A., Schrodt, P. (2009). Family legacies: Constructing individual and family identity through intergenerational storytelling. *Narrative Inquiry, 19*(1), 106-134.

Thumma, S., & Bird, W. (2008). Changes in American megachurches: Tracing eight years of growth and innovation in the nation's largest-attendance congregations. Retrieved February, 1, 2011, from http://hirr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/megastoday2008_summaryreport.html

Tracy, S., & Trethewey, A. (2005). Fracturing the real-self←→fake-self dichotomy: Moving toward "crystallized" organizational discourses and identities. *Communication Theory, 15(2)*, 168-195.

Ward Sr., M. (2010). "I was saved at an early age": An ethnography of fundamentalist speech and cultural performance. *Journal of Communication and Religion*, 108-144.

Warf, B., & Winsberg, M. (2010). Geographies of megachurches in the United States. *Journal of Cultural Geography*, *27*(1), 33-51.

Welch, S. (1975). Sampling by referral in a dispersed population. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *39*(2), 237-246.

Yerby, J. (1995). Family systems theory reconsidered: Integrating social construction theory and dialectical process. *Communication Theory*, *5*, 339-365.

APPENDIX:

INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. **Introduction**
    a. Tell me about yourself. Your age, profession, family…

2. **Experience with Christians**
    a. How long have you been a Christian?
        i. How did you learn about your faith/Christianity?
        ii. What were your experiences with Christianity before you converted?
    b. Do you affiliate with the Lutheran denomination? Why or why not?
        i. If you do not, with which denomination do you affiliate and why?
    c. How long have you affiliated with your denominational affiliation?
    d. Have you ever changed your denominational affiliation?
        i. Why or why not?
        ii. Tell me about the events that led you to that change.
    e. How would you describe your relationship with Christ?
        i. Alternatively, how would you describe yourself as a Christian?
    f. What is most important to you about your faith?

3. **Talk about Faith**
    a. With whom do you talk about your faith?
        i. Christians/Non-Christians?...
        ii. If you do not talk about your faith, why not?
    b. In what ways do you talk about your faith?
        i. How do you make decisions about talking about your faith?
    c. What are some of the reasons you talk about your faith with others?

4. **Evangelism and the Faith Narrative**
    a. Would you describe yourself as converted?
    b. Please tell me about your conversion experience.
    c. Do you share with others how you came to be a Christian? Why or why not?
        i. With whom do you share your story and why?
        ii. How do you choose when to tell your story?
        iii. Tell me how your story has evolved over time.
        iv. Tell me about a time where you made changes to your story.
        v. Explain to me a situation where you would feel most comfortable telling another your conversion story.
        vi. Alternatively, explain to me a situation where you would not feel comfortable telling your conversion story to another.
    d. What do you think the telling of your story accomplishes for the people to whom you tell it?

e. What do you think the telling of your story accomplishes for you as the teller?
f. If you were going to talk to another Christian about sharing their story of conversion, what would you say to them?
g. What makes a "good" conversion story?
h. Are conversion stories important to the church today? In what way?

5. Wrap Up

a. Do you have any final questions or comments to add that you feel are important to what we have discussed today?