

UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

GRADUATE COLLEGE

“THEY CAME ONE AT A TIME”: NATIVE-LED CHURCH PLANTING AND
GROWING THE BODY OF CHRIST FROM THE MARGINS OF CULTURE

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

By

JESSICA WALKER BLANCHARD

Norman, Oklahoma

2010

“THEY CAME ONE AT A TIME”: NATIVE-LED CHURCH PLANTING AND
GROWING THE BODY OF CHRIST FROM THE MARGINS OF CULTURE

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY

BY

Dr. Morris W. Foster, Chair

Dr. Daniel Swan

Dr. Gus Palmer

Dr. Sean O’Neill

Dr. Joe Watkins

I dedicate this dissertation to all of my grandparents who have each given me fine examples of how to live graciously through challenges, lovingly toward others, and humbly in prayer. I strive to live up to these examples.

I thank Gertrude Trammell Walker, my grandmother, whose spirit has taught me to be a strong and outspoken Southern woman. This is how I imagine that you were.

I thank E.A. Walker, my grandfather, whose dedication to his family and an unending zest for adventure reminds me that the best is yet to come!

I thank Joann Jowers Miller, my grandmother, whose unimaginable strength through adversity is truly a testament to the promise that, "I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me." You and my mother are my greatest inspirations.

I thank J.O. Miller, my grandfather, who has instilled in his *entire* family an enthusiastic example of how to achieve milestones through hard work, how to honor your past by making the future better for others, and how to trust in the Lord and acknowledge Him in all things. I hope this work makes you proud.

Acknowledgements

The completion of this dissertation would not be possible without the tremendous support of so many. Let me start by thanking my doctoral committee for their support, guidance and individual contributions to my work. I would like to especially thank Morris Foster, my committee chair, for giving me the opportunity to gain invaluable work and research experience on several projects throughout the course of my graduate career. His mentorship over the years has taught me the importance of developing and nurturing both research and community-based partnerships; these lessons have provided me with a foundation that continues to shape my approach to anthropological research. I would also like to thank committee member Dan Swan for the many thoughtful conversations that guided me through the analysis and writing of this dissertation.

I would like to acknowledge and express sincere thanks to Jason Jackson and Stephen Warren, who both read and offered comments on drafts of this dissertation. Jason is a tremendous inspiration to me as a scholar, and a fine example of what I believe a great ethnographer should be. I thank Stephen Warren for his enthusiastic support of my work over the years, and I greatly admire the immense respect that he has for the Absentee Shawnee people. Another scholar I would like to acknowledge is Leif Selstad. My work has greatly benefited from his willingness to share with me his experiences in the Little Axe community. Finally, I extend sincere appreciation to all of my graduate colleagues with whom I have had the pleasure of having wonderfully thought-provoking discussions over the years. I have learned a great deal from all of you.

Fieldwork is a tremendously humbling experience, and I am forever grateful to those individuals, congregations, and communities who welcomed and assisted me through that process. It is an unexpected gift to glimpse into the lives of remarkable people, but it is truly a blessing to have those same people become a central part of your own life. I express sincere thanks to the congregations of Cornerstone Indian Baptist Church, Earlsboro Indian Baptist Mission, and First Indian Baptist Church of Shawnee. Time spent in each of these congregations has been rewarding beyond measure. Individuals in these churches are too numerous to mention here, but I do hope that this dissertation conveys the warmth and faithfulness that I came to experience among members of these churches.

I also express sincere gratitude to members of the Little Axe community. Little Axe has been the primary site of my fieldwork since 2003. There was no doubt in my mind that one day I would leave my home in Alabama to fulfill my dream of working in Oklahoma. I had no way of knowing, however, that the out-of-the-way community known as Little Axe would come to be the home of so many important relationships, friendships, and events that would forever change my life. To the Shawnee families in Little Axe I say, “Neyiwa.” I also say “Neyiwa” to my Shawnee language instructors, George Blanchard (“nofihe”) and Donald White, whose patient and purposeful instruction in Shawnee language and other things has enriched my life in unexpected ways.

It is with great appreciation that I conclude my acknowledgements by giving heartfelt thanks to my wonderful family whose unconditional love sustains me when I am away from them. I also thank my wonderful husband whose love sustains me always.

Funding for this research was provided by the following sources: Jacobs Research Fund, Phillips Fund for Native American Research, Morris E. Opler Fund, Robert E. Bell Fund, Robberson Research Grant, University of Oklahoma's Graduate Student Senate, and the University of Oklahoma's Department of Anthropology. I am grateful for the financial assistance provided by these organizations.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	iv
List of Illustrations	viii
Abstract	ix
I. “They Just Don’t Come”: Fulfilling God’s Work from the Margins	1
II. Faith in the Field: Notes from an Uncommitted Anthropologist	59
III. Building the Body of Christ: The Burden of Native-led Church Planting	85
IV. Identifying the Target: Local Communities and the Price of Inclusion	145
V. Fostering Inclusion: In the Field, On the Ground, and Beyond	220
VI. Negotiating Exclusivity: Living Against the Margins of Culture	263
VII. Sowing Seeds: Growing the Body of Christ a Handful at a Time	316
Afterword	339
Bibliography	341
Appendix A. Notes on Abbreviations and Use of Biblical Texts	356

List of Illustrations

Wooden Church Sign	4
Softball Tournament, Indian Falls Creek	26
Invitation (Photo by Mickey Bryan)	26
Cornerstone Indian Baptist Church building	70
Earlsboro Noteburning Service	71
Mardock Mission	93
Little Axe Indian Mission flyer	102
Breaking ground for Cornerstone's building construction	112
Revival Singers	119
Cornerstone Indian Baptist Church mission team in Montana	133
Ceremonial Ground Sign: Recording Restriction	201
Emerson Falls (Photo by Mickey Bryant)	256
Bill Barnett, Indian Nations Baptist Church (Photo by <i>Shawnee News Star</i>)	315
Absentee Shawnee Recognition Service Flyer	316

Abstract

Nearly twenty years ago a team of native-led Christian missionaries planted an Indian Baptist church in the culturally conservative Absentee Shawnee community of Little Axe. The reputation of cultural conservatism in Little Axe is grounded in the strict maintenance of certain cultural practices and the use of discursive, social and physical boundaries to ensure the exclusivity of the local native cultural institutions. The exclusivity in this community makes it difficult for church planters to form meaningful attachments in their “target community,” particularly when such attachments are formed around local discourses about “native culture” that are largely inaccessible to most church planters. The work of church planting situates native church members on the margins of the local native community, and yet it is this marginal position relative to the community and its cultural institutions that ensures the church’s continuation. This research focuses on the processes whereby church members produce discourses of inclusivity and exclusivity to negotiate their uncertain position in the “target community.” These specific discursive mechanisms allow church members to redefine and reinscribe their attachments within a community of which most of them are not fully a part. At stake for native church planters working in native communities is the possibility that choosing everlasting life beyond this world means living on the margins of culture while in this world.

I. “They Just Don’t Come”: Fulfilling God’s Work from the Margins

*Those who sow in tears
Shall reap in joy.
He who continually goes forth weeping,
Bearing seed for sowing,
Shall doubtless come again with rejoicing,
Bringing his sheaves with him (Psalms 126: 5-6, NKJV)*

Nearly twenty years ago a group of native and non-native Christian mission workers gathered with the intent to plant an Indian Baptist mission in the Absentee Shawnee community of Little Axe, Oklahoma. This Indian Baptist Mission specifically intended to reach areas with high-concentration Indian populations, such as Little Axe. Church planters hoped that the mission would grow into a church that would serve the spiritual needs of the local Absentee Shawnee people. There are a number of churches in the Little Axe area, including another Baptist church less than a half-mile away on the same grave road, and yet the Indian Baptist Church was established here because, as one church member says, “There was no *Indian* church” in the area.

From the perspective of most church planters, the need for church planting exists anywhere there is a population of “lost” people and no available resources to reach them.¹ Church planters who commit their efforts to beginning a new church do so to reach a specific community or population, known as the

¹ A “lost” person refers to anyone who does not have a personal relationship with Christ, or more generally, someone who is living “in the world” and not according to God’s will.

target community.² Most of the original mission team admittedly knew very little about the native community in Little Axe- their target community- and yet their commitment to planting this Indian church was founded upon the idea that there was an expressed need for an “Indian work” in this native community.³ The need had everything to do with the idea of cultural conservatism that is so tightly linked to this community.

The Absentee Shawnee community in Little Axe is recognized as one of the more culturally conservative native communities in Oklahoma today, and this characterization is based on the community’s strict maintenance of traditional Shawnee cultural practices. These cultural practices, generally the traditional activities associated with ceremonial dance grounds, correspond to a larger Woodland ceremonial complex, and the maintenance of these activities designates Little Axe as a primary hub for contemporary Shawnee ceremonialism.⁴

² Southern Baptist Convention guidelines for church planting instruct planters to “define the target group that God has place on your heart for your church to love and reach” (<http://www.churchplantingvillage.net/site/apps/nlnet/content3.aspx?c=joJMITOxEpH&b=4693077&ct=6616203>, accessed July 12, 2010). The phrase “target group” or “target community” is commonly used among native church planters, particularly those who are well-versed in the literature on the subject.

³ Church members often use the phrase “an Indian work” to refer to a mission effort that specifically targets Indian communities.

⁴ My use of the term “hub” is intended only as a reference to the prevalence of ceremonial activity that takes place in Little Axe, and the high concentration of family units in the area that are responsible for maintenance of the ceremonial grounds. Renya Ramirez employs “hub” to refer to both physical and virtual spaces that serve as mechanisms “for landless Native Americans to sustain a sense of connection to their tribal ‘homes’ and urban spaces through activities...as well as participation in networks that can bridge urban, rural and reservations areas” (2007: 200). I use “hub” in a distinct and much less complex way than does Ramirez, although her concept of “hub” is not completely irrelevant to my interest in native participation in various networks.

Mission workers who came into the Little Axe community in the late 1980s to plant this Indian Baptist church did so with a clear sense that their efforts situated them against, or at least on the margins of, local Shawnee cultural practices. Consider the mission worker's claim that the Indian Baptist Mission was planted specifically in Little Axe because there was "no *Indian* church" here. Little Axe, more than all other Shawnee communities in the state of Oklahoma, is home to the highest concentration of active Shawnee ceremonial grounds. The corporate structure of these grounds is likened to the same collective structure associated with congregations (Jackson 2005). The set of religious practices performed at the ceremonial grounds are the foundation for the predominant form of worship among the Absentee Shawnee today and in the past. The idea that an Indian Baptist church was needed in this community, in spite of the prominence of traditional forms of worship and existing Christian churches, suggests the possibility that newly planted Indian Baptist congregations emerge firmly against local cultural institutions. At the center of this research is the process whereby this particular contemporary native-led Indian Baptist church and its membership comes to exist on the margins of native culture and, for some, why they choose to stay there.

Many from the original team of both native and non-native church members who came from various Indian Baptist congregations to Little Axe to plant the new mission eventually came to form the core congregation of the new

mission. The mission held its first Sunday services in 1989 in the kitchen of a neighboring Baptist church until “the Lord opened the door” for the young mission to acquire a trailer house on an adjacent plot of land. The Little Axe Indian Mission grew in size and in means, and today is a self-governing congregation called Cornerstone Indian Baptist Church (CIBC).

Cornerstone’s congregation was seemingly small when I first came to visit the church, though the pastor asserts often that the congregation is “the number that God wants us to be.” Average Sunday morning attendance ranged from twenty to forty people when I first attended in 2003, and the congregation size has intermittently grown since then. The church congregation is predominantly Native American, with tribal backgrounds including Absentee Shawnee, Creek, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Seminole, Kickapoo, Ponca; non-Indian members are also a central part of the congregation.⁵



A wooden sign that reads, “Cornerstone Indian Baptist Church,” marks the entrance to the church.

A wooden sign that reads “Cornerstone Indian Baptist Church” marks its physical presence in Little Axe today, but the ultimate position of the church in

⁵ Nearly all the non-Indian church members have native spouses or some other native family attachments. Several non-Indian individuals and/or families with no native relations have attended Cornerstone during my time there, but few of them maintain an active and consistent presence in the church. See chapter five for further discussion about the role of non-native visitors.

the community rests on its capacity to navigate within and against the cultural perimeters of their target community. It seems that the church emerged firmly against the cultural institutions that are both meaningful and exclusive to the local native community, and yet the church's marginal position to these community institutions is precisely what ensures its continuation. Why does a native-led mission team plant a church within the boundaries of a culturally conservative Shawnee community that seemingly leaves little room for the recognition of this kind of Native Christianity?

My research explores the process of native-led church planting to understand how changing notions of culture and cultural membership differentially affect the experiences of native peoples living both within and against their own communities. The planting of contemporary Indian Baptist churches in native communities today incites new questions about how social and cultural boundaries are negotiated, authenticated, and often contested by native Christian congregations. At stake for those most impacted by local forms of Native Christianity is the potential for contests over membership in various cultural institutions, and the authentication of certain cultural practices over others on the basis of competing ideas of culture and tradition.

What follows in these chapters is the story of a new church plant negotiating its place in a native community that many of its members are not fully a part. Church members' stories suggest that participation in their target

communities is often conditioned, and even limited, according to local discourses of “native culture.” Native church planters, by virtue of working in diverse target communities, encounter highly localized discourses of “native culture” that incorporate Christianity in very different ways. Thomas Biolsi underscores the power of discourse to create “a narrow and specific range of... actionable” possibilities for those subjected within discourses (2001: 181). Discourses, in and of themselves, are not entirely capable of delimiting actors’ actions and possibilities, but they certainly provide palpable frameworks around which people understand their world and their role in it. The work of church planting means that church planters hoping to reach a local native community must engage with localized discourses about “native culture,” even if such discourses do not make a space for the acceptance of Christianity.

The stories in these chapters also underscore how both native church planters and the members of their target communities come to differentially define their relationship to “native culture” over time, especially in the context of Christian mission work. On the one hand, church planting is inescapably linked to a contentious history of Indian-Christian interactions that posits Christianity against the supposed essence of native culture. A native church member recounts the common perception about Christianity among Indian people to whom he speaks, “That’s a white man’s way.” Such perspectives

challenge the intrinsic cultural value of Christianity for Indian people simply by saying it is not their “way.”

More relevant here is how the planting of new Indian Baptist churches underscores the many ways that the things of “native culture” (i.e. the local activities, behaviors, ideologies, relationships, and social positions) come to redefine how some native Christians live alongside their families, their communities, and occasionally, an entire way of life from which many are excluded. For example, one church member describes feeling excluded from his “native culture” because he was unable to fully establish meaningful points of attachment within the larger native ceremonial community. He opts to live against the things of “native culture,” namely the ceremonial practices and the exclusive socio-political structure of the ceremonial grounds, because he does not “chase after something that doesn’t want me.” Such examples point to the idea that, “no one...anywhere, can live easily with his or her culture” (Dombrowski 2001: 3). The stories that follow consider how contemporary Indian Baptist church planters position themselves in relation to discourses of “native culture” to forge meaningful attachments both within and against the communities who become their targets. Negotiating discourses of native culture is central to the process whereby native church planters reconcile differential memberships in multiple native institutions.

A great source of motivation for this project stems from questions about why this native-led church and its membership would situate itself in a seemingly exclusive, culturally conservative native community. In other words, the church and many of its original members did not seem to easily “fit” into the community. Many of the original church members admittedly knew nothing of the Little Axe area and its residents before joining the church planting efforts. Other church members had already been living on the margins of this community and had every reason to stay away. Yet a group of native and non-native mission workers chose to transplant themselves into this target Shawnee community. They created a congregation of believers and devote their lives to spreading the Word to “our Indian people.”⁶

The early members of the church believe that their efforts did ‘plant a seed’ in the community, but nearly twenty years after the church’s inception it is sometimes difficult to see how that seed has grown. Then there are times that I come to church and follow a billowing trail of dust from cars turning off the dirt road into the church parking lot. I occasionally see a different tribal license plate in the parking lot or someone pulling into church from the east side of the road,

⁶ The majority of church members speak of their own calling to witness to “our own people.” The “Indian-to-Indian” rhetoric creates a degree of inclusiveness and suggests relations of inclusiveness that do not necessarily play out in day-to-day interactions. The “Indian-to-Indian” discourse found throughout all of the personal accounts creates a common ground for witnessing on the basis of a generalized category (being “Indian”). The significance of “being Indian” in the mission field is palpable in as much as everyone I spoke with suggested its importance. The distinctions between native church members and those whom they witness to, particularly as most church members are not engaging with members of their own communities, emerge as highly consequential factors in the ability to sustain genuine inclusiveness in the social groups that they wish to reach. See chapter five for more.

signaling the presence of visitors or maybe even a new member. The presence in church of a ceremonial ground participant always strikes me as curious, and causes me to wonder who they have come with, will they continue coming, or what would other community members think?

I admittedly get caught up with the idea that the church is somehow at odds with the local ceremonialism; hence, my peeked curiosity at the visitation of ground participants. I also get caught up with the misconception that increased numbers equal church growth. Both of these associations are simplistic and misleading. One woman, a core member of Cornerstone, reminds me of the insignificance of congregation numbers,

...It's not about numbers- that's what the world looks at. There's so many seeds that have been planted out there with our outreach that we do not know whether or not they're going somewhere else. Only God knows if they've been saved. But we have reached out, the seeds and everything been planted- we may not see this until we get to Heaven, what's happened.

Outreach by the church is happening, but such outreach is difficult to measure according to unspecified notions of success. The conventional lens of “success” cannot make sense of a single baptism, a transferred membership, a child’s profession of faith, or even the transition of an Indian Mission into a self-sustaining church if they do not also attempt to understand how such movements impact those for whom the work of Christian missions imparts the greatest price.

The stories of native-led church planting that follow suggest that at stake for native mission workers doing the work of church planting in their own and

others' communities is contests over membership in local native institutions.

Being a church member does not mean that you are somehow not native or not local, but the work of church planting in native communities certainly redefines the significance of being both.

Christian Missions as Native Institutions

It is widely held that native people continue to pay a disproportionately high price for the impact of Christian missions in their communities over time. Scholars and critics of the native Christian experience produce accounts replete with the lasting vestiges of the colonial project that propelled Indian people away from a 'pure' way of life into their ultimate demise. The colonial project, writes George Tinker,

...created numerous devices and policies intentionally designed to separate Indian people from their cultures and their religious traditions and to encourage a mixing of bloods to weed out the last remnants of Indianness. [2004: 38]

The process of converting native peoples to Christianity was largely conditioned by the specificity of individual mission projects; modes of interaction with native peoples, theological differences, interdenominational competition, nationalist goals, and recruiting techniques produced a diversity of mission projects across Indian Country. Hundreds of years of systemic efforts to convert native people to Christianity continue to condition the many different native Christian experiences being had today. Scholars too often depict the cultural

economy of the native Christian experience, so to speak, as merely an exchange of native culture for Christianity at the expense of understanding contemporary manifestations of the native Christian experience in the context of local communities.

Vine Deloria, Jr., native scholar, critic and theologian, writes, “Tribes that resisted the overtures of the missionaries seemed to survive. Tribes that converted were never heard from again” (Deloria 1999: 22). This statement makes a point commonly held among both scholars and some native people alike; namely, the impact of Christian missions on native communities is damaging, irreversible, and it signals the transition from one way of life into another. This perspective offers a productive point of departure for rethinking the nature of native community life before, during, or in spite of Christian influences.

Christianity is too often cited as an explanation for why some native individuals become marginal to native community life, but what happens when Christianity is removed from the equation? How do you make sense of social or political marginalization within native communities without, or perhaps in addition to, the pretext of Christianity? Individual stories of church planting suggest instead that native people who live on the margins of their communities, and ultimately choose to stay there, do so for reasons that are deeply embedded

in family and tribal histories and situated in highly localized contexts. Many of these stories are framed by Christian conversion, but many are not.

Sergei Kan's *Memory Eternal* cautions against the skeptic that relegates Christianity among native people as only "a thin protective veneer underneath which timeless precolonial beliefs and values survive intact" at the expense of considering the "possibility of a genuine Native American Christianity" (Kan 1999: xx). I strongly agree with Kan's assessment that the failure of scholars "to focus on the Christian churches as Indian institutions" results in "scholars [removing] themselves from an important dimension of Indian experience, past and present" (Kan 1999: xxii). My research is not committed to demonstrating the legitimacy of newly planted Indian Baptist churches as genuine native institutions. Indeed, the status of Indian Baptist churches as legitimate native institutions is not up for debate among most congregants (nor is it really of particular concern for most members of the church's target community). Such questions are interesting, but they tend to devolve into highly individualized questions of identity that are beyond this discussion (i.e. Can you be both Indian and Christian?).

Instead, church members' stories suggest that the legitimacy of newly planted Indian churches should be less about being a *native* institution and more about the work of becoming a *local* institution. "Native" institutions are defined in rather narrow terms in Little Axe. Native institutions in Little Axe are

generally those that promote the community's reputation for cultural conservatism, including Shawnee ceremonial activities, traditional governance and naming systems, language proficiency, et cetera. Even tribal activities of a secular nature, including senior lunches, pie suppers, tribally owned businesses and language classes, are integral as local native institutions because they offer a platform for community members to promote locally meaningful aspects of native culture (i.e. language, social relations, cooking traditions, joking, and others). There is little possibility that the Indian Baptist church will be seen as a native institution in this community simply because its work does not directly promote the cultural conservatism (i.e. the predominant discourse about "native culture") of the community, nor will it necessarily ever want to.⁷

Native institutions promote locally meaningful discourses about "native culture"; as such, native institutions also act as primary sites of native cultural production. Thus, it is within local native institutions that ideas about what is and is not "native" are defined. There are highly exclusive measures to control what parties have stakes in cultural production, where and when cultural production takes place, and what local institutions are validated as sites of cultural production.

⁷ Contrast this particular aspect of the Indian Baptist church in Little Axe with other religious institutions in Little Axe, such as peyote worship, that are considered "native institutions" despite not being "local institutions" See Chapter four for more discussion about this.

Jessica Cattelino's *High Stakes* smartly employs Pierre Bourdieu's (1993) concept of "cultural production" to explore how "culture is delimited, valued, and generated in a power-laden field of social and economic relations" (2008: 31-32). *High Stakes* considers how native communities evaluate the risks and integrity of expanding and/or limiting the institutionalization of cultural production, thus how native communities actively measure the "currency of culture" (Cattelino 2008: 32). The rules of cultural production in Little Axe, discussed more in chapter four, have thus far been constructed in highly exclusive terms. Such exclusivity makes it difficult for the newly planted Indian Baptist church, or any institution that is not sanctioned as a legitimate institution of cultural production, to participate meaningfully in local fields of cultural production.

Bourdieu says that fields of cultural production offer "to those who are involved in them a *space of possibles*" (i.e. a common framework) that provides "all that one must have...in order to be in the game" (1993: 176). The currency of culture in Little Axe is measured according to rather narrow terms of cultural participation, thus the field of cultural production and the "space of possibles" is inaccessible for many. According to these exclusive rules of engagement, the new Indian Baptist church sits firmly on the margins of the target community's fields of cultural production.

The church and its membership occupy seemingly unproductive positions in the local politics of cultural production. Extended discussions with church members, however, reveal that their ineffective positions in relation to local cultural production is less about being church members and more closely linked to tensions surrounding the politics of race, localism, and perceptions of cultural competency. Indeed, as the stories throughout this dissertation suggest, there is little possibility for a neutral position in the contested spaces of cultural production.

The church in focus in this research, in many ways, is not fully “in the game” of local cultural production and this seems to bode well for its longevity in the community. This research began as an attempt to understand the dynamic of one newly planted Indian church in one culturally conservative Indian community. Neither the church nor the community makes sense apart from the many conditions that led to the eventual placement of one into the center of the other. This movement across geographic spaces, discursive spaces, and cultural boundaries makes up the content of the chapters that follow.

The remainder of this chapter is an introduction of things needed to engage with a discussion of native-led church planting, beginning first with a brief and general consideration of Southern Baptist church planting. This chapter also explores the differences between “old” and “new” Indian Baptist churches. There are many kinds of Indian Christian churches, and more specifically, many

types of Indian Baptist churches; it is important to specify the Indian Baptist tradition in which the newly planted churches in this research emerge. Finally, this work is situated within the broader context of anthropological investigations of the native Christian experience in an attempt to offer a more nuanced understanding of why Christianity is often peripheralized in scholarly treatments of the native experience.

Church Planting: An Introduction

The process of beginning a new church in a designated area by a team of missionaries is known as church planting. Church planting begins with the establishment of a mission. A mission, explains a native mission worker, is a “new work” built upon an “organized group of Christian believers” who “want to get something started in the area and they all believe the same way.” The operations of a new mission are largely dependent, financially and otherwise, on a more established church body or an organization. Most of the church plants presented in this research are affiliated Southern Baptist (SBC) churches; as such, most of them began as missions dependent on a more established SBC church or an SBC affiliate like the North American Missions Board. Church planting (discussed more fully in chapter three) is a form of institutional sponsorship whereby an established institution guarantees a newly formed institution through its most vulnerable periods of growth.

One goal for new missions is to grow in both size and capabilities, and eventually to establish themselves as self-sustaining churches. It is one thing to begin a mission, and another thing to plant a church. Many missions never develop into an established church. The planting of a new church, as one native pastor explains, expects to see its organization grow from “infancy with mission work to where it [gets] to be very independent on its own.” Another mission worker describes this transition as if “it’s just like you’re a little child trying to become an adult.” The transition from mission to church, or from child into an adult, is an uncertain likelihood for many young Indian missions who often depend on larger Indian churches who also struggle to gain traction in their target native communities.

There is an important note about the distinction between missions and “self-sustaining” Indian Baptist churches. Vine Deloria, Jr. writes about the historical relations of *dependency* within the larger Indian mission project:

...For most of this century Indian churches and chapels have been classified as missions because they have not had sufficient income to be self-supporting in the same manner as prosperous non-Indian parishes. Mission, however, connotes a status in which the immediate human environment is hostile to the church or overwhelmingly lethargic...It galls Indian Christians considerably to be seen as unchurched and needing conversion simply because they lack large parish budgets... [Deloria 1999: 109]

Two points are worth noting here. First, Deloria’s point about the general insufficiency of resources in Indian missions, comparable to their non-Indian

counterparts, is important. He does little here to challenge this comparison, as do I, but it is worth noting that the variety and utilization of resources in Indian missions today is not *less than* non-Indian churches as much as it is situated in highly disparate contexts. “We are not saved to sit,” a native pastor tells me emphatically, “we are saved to serve.” The growth of Indian missions is at the heart of the stories presented in this research. Some missions transition into churches; some do not. The transition from a mission to a church is important, but it is the transformation of the church family, the target community, and one’s personal relationship to the Lord that is of upmost importance to church planters.

The second part of Deloria’s comment above suggests that Indian missions are plagued by the perception that they persist in an unfinished state of growth, and are in need both funds and further sophistication in the Word of God. Most of the native church planters engaged in my research would likely agree with this point. Indeed, the transition from a mission into a church denotes a new church’s capability to sustain itself apart from the assistance of a sponsoring church or organization. As Southern Baptist churches, most of the churches encountered in my research continue to be committed to the larger Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and its affiliates after the period of mission “sponsorship” ends.

An entirely separate form of church organization within the greater Indian Baptist network is the “independent church.” Independent churches are not usually affiliated with a particular denominational organization like the Southern Baptist Convention. The distinction between “affiliated churches” and “independent churches” in the context of Indian Baptist churches is important; “affiliated” churches tend to be the more newly planted churches that maintain close affiliations with an overarching organization, while “independent” churches tend to be more common among the “older” Indian Baptist churches. “Old-style” Indian Baptist churches are distinct from newly planted Indian Baptist churches in that they have maintained consistent local congregations for generations, they tend to be deeply embedded in some aspect of the local community structure, and they maintain independence from any larger Baptist organization or affiliated sponsor. These older Indian Baptist churches are distinct from newly planted Indian churches in important ways. These distinctions are presented in more depth later in this chapter.

There is the general perception in the greater Baptist community (as reported by Indian Baptist leaders) that Indian Baptist missions remain as missions for years on end. This perception permeates some of the scholarly work on Indian missions. The implication here is that Indian Baptist missions, particularly within the context of the larger Baptist community, struggle to grow their churches in any real or impactful way. Such perceptions speak to the

deeper concerns that Indian Baptists have about their own churches: how can Indian Baptists be capable witnesses for the Lord if they cannot grow their own missions into churches?

A pastor of an Indian Baptist Mission tells me of a “time when the Indian churches [in Oklahoma] were growing and now they’re at a time when they see no growth at all.” The same pastor says of the mission that he leads, “I have asked the Lord that before the year’s out that we might become a church.” The goals for Indian missions are to eventually transition into a church, an established congregation, and a powerful voice for the Lord. More than that, however, both Indian missions and churches seek to make an impact as Indian Christians in their own native communities. The stories that follow suggest that a physical church offers a platform for Indian Christians to speak in their communities about their faith. This specific platform is particularly meaningful for some native people who otherwise find it difficult to participate in the existing institutions of their own communities.

The difficulty for many newly planted Indian churches is that they struggle to attract local congregants, and the power of their stories falls flat onto pews filled with the same core members. Church members tell me about the mighty things that the Lord has done in their life, but *I go to them* to hear these stories. How do native church planters convey their testimonies, the stories of how God has transformed their lives, in their target communities if no one

comes to church to listen? Consider the basic but honest observation made by many church members about local interest in new churches, “They just don’t come.” Born-again Christians look to tell others the intimate stories of struggle and transformation that separate them from the world. This willingness to engage the world in their personal lives accounts for the overwhelming willingness of native church members to participate in this research.

The tenuous nature of newly planted Indian Baptist churches is the result, in part, of conflicting efforts by the church or mission to exist as both a local native institution in a chosen target community and as a contributor to the greater Baptist agenda. Newly planted Indian churches often find themselves in a sort of double bind. On one hand, most new churches are looking to establish locally meaningful roots in target communities of which most church members are not initially a part. On the other hand, new churches depend heavily on the assistance of more established churches, as well as the assistance of an extended Baptist network that includes cooperative programs within the Southern Baptist Convention such as the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma (BGCO) and the North American Mission Board (NAMB).

Affiliations within a local target community and those forged within the more extended network of Baptist organizations are not mutually exclusive; it is reasonable to expect that most churches maintain working relationships in both arenas. It is also reasonable to expect that participation in the extended network

of Baptist organizations can destabilize the church's efforts to fully engage in the social and cultural institutions of the local target community. In short, the double bind refers to the fact that time and resources necessary to participate in one arena are often expended at the expense of participation in the other arena.

Greater Baptist Community

My use of the term *greater* or *extended Baptist community* refers broadly to the institutional structure of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), including the associations, local programs, and churches that are subsumed within the SBC. Most of the newly planted Indian Baptist churches considered in this research are a result of cooperation between other SBC churches and some SBC association, perhaps the North American Mission Board (NAMB), the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma (BGCO), or some other affiliated program. The three congregational units highlighted in this research, including Cornerstone Indian Baptist Church, Earlsboro Indian Baptist Mission, and First Indian Baptist Church in Shawnee, are each affiliated with the SBC.

The SBC recognizes all churches to be independent and autonomous units; as such, each church determines the appropriate degree of affiliation with SBC programs, and the level of participation in a local association, a state

convention or the national convention⁸. There are varying degrees of affiliation with SBC programs and initiatives in the three above-mentioned Indian churches at the time of my fieldwork. I have seen the following SBC programs incorporated into these churches: Brotherhood, Woman's Missionary Union, Lifeway Christian Resources, the Annie Armstrong Eastern Offering for North American Missions, the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering, and the SBC Cooperative Program. While the basic principles and theological teachings of the SBC are present in these churches, it is difficult to know the ultimate position of Indian churches in the greater Baptist community.

Church planting, and the subsequent growth of that church, is an ever-changing process that relies on existing networks of support in the greater Baptist community, including networks forged with other Indian churches and the more extensive networks that exist in the entire non-Indian Baptist organizational structure. The process of church planting ultimately involves a reorientation from existing networks to the establishment of new ones. The growth of a church plant denotes a transition whereby the focus is *less* about nourishing the larger networks of cross-congregational and organizational support and *more* about cultivating a meaningful place for themselves in their chosen community. Establishing an Indian church in a local native community,

⁸ Mission churches are somewhat exempt from the SBC's "autonomous" status until they are an official church and a 'mother church' or some other association no longer sponsors them. For more information on the SBC's position on churches see (<http://www.sbc.net/aboutus/positionstatements.asp>, accessed March 22, 2010).

particularly one that is private and culturally exclusive like Little Axe, requires the church and its congregation to commit to a distinctly local emphasis.

There are two points that must be addressed here. First, a church's newfound focus in the local community does not nullify prior relationships with other churches or with the greater Baptist community. Furthermore, there is no single way to forge a meaningful attachments in a local community; the planting of CIBC in Little Axe is a great example of the complexity of *the local*. The story of Cornerstone is a story of native-led church planting, but it is also a story about fostering a sense of inclusiveness from outside the margins of a community. As is apparent in the following chapters, the complexities of the local for a church like Cornerstone are not the same local complexities had by a newly planted church in another community.

Old Churches, Newly Planted Indian Churches, and Contemporary Native-led Congregations: Important Distinctions

Indian Baptist leaders estimate that there are approximately two hundred and fifty Indian Baptist churches in Oklahoma right now.⁹ Indian Baptist churches represent incredibly diverse groupings of church members, congregation types, tribal backgrounds, styles of worship, and community settings. In focus throughout this research is the type of Indian Baptist church

⁹ Indian Baptist leaders communicate this figure during presentations and sermons at the 2008 Indian Falls Creek Assembly, and I have anecdotally heard similar figures elsewhere.

that I call *contemporary native-led church plants*. The classification of “contemporary” has more to do with the relative newness of the church and the process by which it is planted, than it does with any particular style of worship or expressive tradition. Contemporary native-led churches encompass regional and organizational distinctions that contribute to the diversity of Indian churches throughout Oklahoma and beyond. The next section introduces this diversity of Indian churches, and then offers some important distinctions between the contemporary Indian Baptist churches in this research and other types of Indian Baptist churches.

Perhaps the best opportunity to observe the collective differences that permeate contemporary Indian Baptist congregations is the Indian Falls Creek (IFC) Baptist Assembly, an annual gathering of Indian Baptist youth and adults from across Oklahoma and beyond. The Indian Falls Creek Baptist Assembly gathering meets every summer at the Falls Creek campgrounds nestled in the foothills of the Arbuckle Mountains near Davis, Oklahoma. The IFC Baptist Assembly has gathered annually since 1947, and nowhere in the state is there a comparable example of Indian Baptists congregating and rejoicing as a single, unified group.

Individuals attending IFC can represent either their home church or just attend the week’s events as individuals. There are activities that single out specific churches, including sports tournaments, fry bread cooking awards, cabin



Prayer before softball tournament, Indian Falls Creek 2008. Photo by author.

arrangements, and other contests. Largely, however, IFC is a chance for church members to temporarily shed the cloak of ones local congregation and just be a part of an

impressive gathering of thousands of Indian Baptists. IFC is a time of renewal for many campers. Such renewal is indispensable for individual campers and their home congregations because, for at least this week, the burden of reaching Indian people is carried by many and not just a few.

The sense of collective renewal experienced by campers at IFC is a sharp contrast to the situations that many experience when they return to their home



Invitation, Indian Falls Creek 2008. Photo by Mickey Bryant.

churches. Home churches are certainly a source of encouragement and renewal for their members and for visitors, but the challenges experienced by many Indian Baptist churches seeking to grow in their communities become abundantly clear upon return from an event like IFC. Single congregations do not often see grand and sustained displays of collective fervor. Single congregations do not regularly experience such prolonged and intense anticipation for worship by its members, particularly the youth. Single congregations do not regularly see so many ‘decisions’ being made for Lord. Congregations, most significantly, do not share the burden of reaching Indian people more fully than they do at a gathering like Indian Falls Creek.

IFC offers a poignant picture of the state of Indian Baptist churches in Oklahoma right now. This picture is one of intense cooperation, cross-congregational support, of great enthusiasm for bringing other native people to Christ, and general anticipation for seeing what the Lord has in store for Indian people. Recent trips to IFC impress in me a sense that leaders in the greater Indian Baptist community are looking to propel the work of Indian churches onto more visible stages, both at the state and national levels. Emerson Falls, a native pastor of Glorietta Indian Baptist Church in Oklahoma City, is currently the elected President of the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma (BGCO)¹⁰ Falls is also President of the Fellowship of Native American Christians (FNAC),

¹⁰ The BGCO has over 1,700 Baptist churches in its organizations, and Falls concurrent elections in 2008 and 2009 marks him as the first Native American to ever be elected as president of this organization.

a new specialized ministry of the greater Southern Baptist Convention (SBC).

The Southern Baptist Convention, a denomination representing over 42,000 Southern Baptist Churches worldwide, also recently elected the first native person to serve as president of this organization.¹¹

Current efforts to propel Indian Baptist agendas onto a wider scale evoke a broader discussion about the role and potential affect of Indian churches in the greater 'Kingdom Vision'¹². The newly formed Fellowship of Native American Christians (FNAC), mentioned above, is a specialized ministry that seeks to heighten the visibility of Indian churches. Increasing the visibility of Indian churches in the greater Baptist community is, in part, a manifestation of a movement anticipated by a man named Henry Blackaby. Several times throughout my fieldwork I heard mention of Henry Blackaby, world-renowned founder of Blackaby Ministries International. Blackaby, a non-native Southern Baptist leader, claims that native Christians will be the ones responsible for awakening the world into spiritual revival (Williamson: n.d.).

Blackaby's revelation came to him as he read the biblical scriptures in Luke. The book of Luke tells of Zachariah and Elizabeth, both well-advanced in

¹¹ The current president of the SBC is Johnny Hunt, a Lumbee Indian from North Carolina.

¹² The idea of "Kingdom Vision" manifests in a Southern Baptist initiative known as Empowering Kingdom Growth (EKG). The EKG "is an initiative designed to call individual Southern Baptists to renew their passion for the Lord Jesus and the reign of His kingdom in their hearts, families, and churches from which God can forge a spiritual movement marked by holy living, sacrificial service, and global witness" (sbc.net). One component of the EKG is the Acts 8:1 Challenge, an initiative of the SBC's North American Mission Board and the International Mission Board to "encourage churches to think of their associations, state conventions and national and international mission boards as their partners in reaching 'Jerusalem,' 'Judea,' 'Samaria,' and 'the ends of the earth' as described in Acts 1:8" (sbc.net). Some local Indian Baptist church leaders have encouraged their congregations to take part in this challenge.

years, conceiving a child after years of prayer. Blackaby says in an article written about him, “Just as God came to Zachariah, He came to me and said my prayers had been heard” (Williamson: n.d.). Blackaby’s prayer for over sixty years “is for a mighty outpouring of the Spirit of God and revival on the native Indian people on their reserves, in the cities, in their families, among their young people and children” (Williamson: n.d.). The hope for Indian Christians to achieve greater visibility and worldly revival permeates the messages of those at the forefront of Indian Baptist leadership in Oklahoma. The fulfillment of these bold projections begins in the congregations of local Indian Baptist churches. This research on native-led church planting considers the impact of visibility for native Christians working as church planters in their own communities.

It was during my last trip to IFC in 2008 that I had an impromptu conversation with two women from an Indian Baptist Church in Okfuskee County, Oklahoma. I had gone to a specific cabin that night to visit members of CIBC, the church at the center of this research, shortly before the Thursday night worship service. I knew members of this church well and so these two women immediately stood out to me as either visitors or members of another church. These women were sharing the cabin with Cornerstone because they had not come to IFC with their own church congregation. Indian churches from across the state rent out cabins owned by larger, non-Indian churches and it is not unusual for multiple Indian churches to share a cabin during their week’s stay.

Sharing is important for the smaller congregations that cannot fill an entire cabin on their own, but sharing is also essential for those churches that cannot bare the financial burdens of renting an entire cabin. Sharing is also important for individuals such as these two women who had come to IFC because they yearned for a type of worship that they could not find in their home church.

I was not familiar with the women's home church and so our conversation quickly turned into a discussion of the differences between churches like theirs' and churches like the one I had come to visit that night. I had spent ample time working in three different Indian Baptist churches at this point in my fieldwork, in addition to a variety of Indian churches that I had visited for revivals, singings, special services, conferences, and such. All of these churches are contemporary churches. I understood each of these churches to be meaningfully different from each other, but all of these churches are distinctly different from the types of churches familiar to these two women.

Old to New

The two women described their home church to me and to the others listening. They described their church as a "real traditional Creek church" evidenced by sermons spoken in the Creek language, songs sung in the Creek language, men and women occupying separate pews, ushers using sticks to direct members during service, women never walking behind the pulpit, and a

designated place for ‘sinners’ to sit during service. Their church met formally only once a month while the remaining Sundays in the month was reserved for visiting (i.e. helping, supporting) other churches in the area¹³. These women were considered part of the “younger generation” of their church and they were probably forty or fifty years of age. The women yearned to supplement their monthly church services with new forms of worship that might attract younger people back into the church. The hundreds of Indian youth mingling around the grounds of Falls Creek that night must have been a stark contrast to the dwindling youth numbers they described at their home church.

The women seemed encouraged by the collective worship experience they had seen thus far at IFC, but this enthusiasm waned with the realization that their church elders would not permit such new forms of worship into their existing services. Their camp houses are characterized by the sounds of cow horns and thunderous acappella voices, not power point slides and electronically amplified instruments. These two women shared a cabin with strangers because their home church would not have approved of their presence at IFC. Their story reflects a tension present in communities everywhere: old verses new, young verses old, tradition verses change, desires verses responsibilities. More than

¹³ The practice of rotating church services, or attending multiple churches as part of a cyclical pattern of congregational support, is a practice that is particularly common in rural communities. Rotating church services, a process that often entails pastors and congregants attending different churches according to a specified schedule, enables the maintenance of many different congregations that might otherwise not be self-sustaining in small communities. The practice of rotating church services also indicates the presence of informal visiting networks common in many native communities.

these loaded dichotomies, however, this anecdote of the two women from a “real traditional Creek church” points to a larger narrative about contemporary Indian Baptist churches and the communities in which they are embedded.

The most basic observation here is that there are different types of Indian Baptist churches. It is telling that the women’s description of the “old churches” was as alien to many Cornerstone members sitting at the table as it was to me. I had known of these “old” churches and had visited one by this point in my research, but my own frames of reference for understanding the “old churches” were no more extensive than some of the church members with whom I was working at the time¹⁴. While I worked with some church members who did grow up in the “old churches” or at least remembered visiting them with their grandparents, it is rare that any of them would ever profess to be a rightful part of the social or cultural fabric of the older Indian Baptist churches.

One of the first interviews that I conducted for this research was with a young woman in her thirties. I met this woman at CIBC, although I had already come to know a number of her family members through interactions at other churches. She was a single mother living in one of the tribal housing additions in the city of Norman, and it was there that we had our first conversation in her living room. Her youngest child, running around the living room as we talked,

¹⁴ It is common to have Creek hymn singers attend revivals, funerals, and Fourth Sunday sings hosted by contemporary Indian churches. As a result, most members of Indian Baptist congregations are at least familiar with the singing styles of the ‘older’ churches.

seemed to have a particular interest in my audio recorder. The woman spoke about her recent decision to join Cornerstone, a decision guided in part by God's calling to her "to get my life right." She said in the interview that she and her family "just fit" at Cornerstone, more than other churches she had attended in the past.

She spoke about the many churches that she attended before Cornerstone and then she recounts the most earnest story of visiting her grandmother's church as a child. Her grandmother attended an "old Creek church." The experience for her was little more than a dim memory of an older way of life, and yet the smallest details tell a quite powerful story:

...I can't even remember the name of the church; it's an Indian Creek name. And there would be a bunch of different old camp houses all over, and it seems like different families would stay in the camp houses. It seemed like they would come on Fridays and stay 'till Sunday. They'd bring their bedding, the food, everything...I remember people sitting up late at night with a lantern and...drinking coffee. I remember the room being kind of yellowish from the lantern and old wood, just the smell of smoke. It was wonderful. It was dark, quiet. But there was people- we would go with different people or they would come to our camp and visit. I remember there was an old bed- that's what we slept on. It wasn't nothing fancy at all. Long picnic tables, just something always cooking, some food, something always ready to eat. Coffee was always made. I was really, really young, but that's kind of what I remember. Trees. It was out in the country, somewhere off dirt roads...

She sits back in her chair and it is almost like I can see the past playing in her mind for the first time in many years. She continues,

...If I remember right, I think they spoke a lot of Indian. I don't remember them speaking- even when they preached and when they sang-

I don't remember them speaking English. Cause I had a hard time. I didn't understand it. Oh, even in the churches, the men would sit on one side and the women would sit on the other side... It was in a building with pews. I don't even remember if there was a piano in there. I just remember they would always sing old Creek hymns. And when you walked in, there was always like an usher- they might call him something else- but he would point, "You sit here." He would- the girls, males on one side, females on one side- seemed like they always tell you. And I think they were probably trying to fill up the spaces at the front too. But the difference...oh gosh...

There is a palpable sadness at the possibility that, "These churches aren't around anymore" but then she resigns herself to another possibility. She says,

...I'm just not involved and I don't know. I don't remember how to find it, you know. I think it is kind of sad, cause I would love my children to see something like that... If I don't show my children, it could die. I don't know who all keeps up with it.

She quickly discounts her experiences as anything more than a way of life of which she never fully felt a part. She maintains that these older churches as innately "more traditional" but it is the newer churches where she feels part of a "church family."

Her story highlights one of the central distinctions made by church members with whom I worked about the difference between the "old churches" and the newer churches. Namely, members of contemporary Indian Baptist churches tend to reinforce the culturally rich composition of the "old churches," often at the expense of the cultural affiliations or authority within the newer churches. This tendency to distinguish old and new churches by cultural richness, in turn, says something about the perception of most newly planted

Indian Baptist churches and their native membership as culturally deprived. I found it commonplace for church members in contemporary Indian churches to “manifest a keen nostalgia for lifeways and knowledge thought to be traditional, and lamented as otherwise forgotten, degraded, and increasingly inaccessible” (Orta 1998: 165). The increasing inaccessibility of native cultural practices for some church members, particularly those practices deemed traditional, has little to do with their status as church members. Rather, the inaccessibility of native cultural practices for many of the church members with whom I worked has more to do with the difficulties of negotiating a locally meaningful position within the social and cultural institutions of a “home community.”

Contemporary Indian church members tend to exaggerate the cultural distance between their own churches and the “old churches.” I frequently hear the suggestion that my research would greatly benefit from visiting “such and such church,” usually a Creek or Seminole church that sounds like the “old churches” described above. Church members repeatedly ask about my experience in “churches back east”¹⁵ and seem perplexed (or amused) at my interest in their own churches in lieu of churches that are “more cultural.” A church member from one of the Indian missions that I worked explains,

¹⁵ “East” here generally denotes Eastern Oklahoma; specifically, “east” in this context refers to rural Seminole and Creek communities.

“Churches around here are the same as the churches that I’ve gone to that were non-Indian.” This member of Earlsboro Indian Baptist Mission continues,

My grandfather was a preacher at an Indian Baptist church, where they speak only Creek... So to me, that was a lot more cultural, I guess, than here. These churches around here seem to have picked up a lot of the other influence- the non-native influence.

Another church member describes the reaction of a friend from an older Seminole church who visited Cornerstone. He says to her, “Oh gosh. You guys are more like white churches!” She continues,

...He said even the way that we sing- we sing “Amazing Grace” more contemporary. And they sing “A-ma-zing Gra-.” They still have their- what is it called, their accent- like their Seminole/Creek accent. The way they even sing. And he’s, “Gah, ya’ll sing so like ‘white man’” (she laughs). And even in comparison to the things they do compared to what we do. The men, of course, sit on the left side. The women sit on the right side. And oh, they are more strict, I would say, in the church services. Their ushers, you know, they make sure they seat people...And there’s no laughing when the offering plate’s being passed around. Everything is very serious, to me. And I like that. I like the way that they do their work in the church. And I think our churches are a little more free or loose than how strict they are in their services...

The idea that some Indian Baptist churches are less “strict” and less “cultural,” and teetering on the verge of “non-Indian” in some assessments, suggests a contested relationship between native Christians and the notion of “native culture” that is pervasive among some native people and scholars alike.

It is common for church members to differentiate the “old” and “new” Indian churches on the grounds that the older churches are stricter while the newer churches are more flexible. Older churches strictly monitor behavior

during church service but behavior outside of the church, particularly participation in “cultural things,” is also highly monitored. A woman with ties to an “old” church says to me, “[if] I’m seen at a stomp dance, that would be really, really bad. I mean it just wouldn’t be right.” I overheard an exchange between some women before an afternoon service at an old Creek church. One woman, a visitor, said that she belonged to a church whose name sounded like “Bird Creek” to which an older church member jokingly replied, “You don’t mean Duck Creek do you?” Duck Creek is the name of a Yuchi (Euchee) stomp ground, and thus this exchange served to establish the visitor’s commitment to church life over stomp ground ways.

It is interesting that contemporary Indian Baptist members often uphold older Indian Baptist churches as embedded in native cultural practices given the rather strict principles among some contemporary native Christians against participation in some native cultural activities. The practices that contemporary church members revere so highly in the older church services include the use of native language in song and sermon, the remoteness and simplicity of the church grounds, and the commitment to worship that harkens to an older way of life.¹⁶

¹⁶ Native cultural practices beyond this, particularly any kinds of participation in Woodland ceremonial practices like stomp dance, seem to have little place in the older eastern Indian Baptist churches. Consider the following humorous anecdotes. An older woman was telling a story about meeting someone at a stomp ground. She had never been to the grounds before, but she could hear the stomp dance in the distance. Once there, she was dumbfounded at the literal darkness of the grounds. “How do they see?” she kept asking. She wondered out loud if all they did throughout the night was dance and stop, dance and stop. Her story prompted another woman to tell a story about getting lost and ending up in a location that looked to be an empty dance ground. She expressed a slight embarrassment about having ended up there, almost in the same way that church members might joke about “ending up” at a casino.

Those who lament the “old ways” found in their grandparents’ churches also have very ambiguous ideas about the role of “native culture,” *per se*, in their own contemporary Indian Baptist church services.

One of the most central points of distinction made about contemporary Indian Baptist churches by its members is the significance of flexibility and change in the church. While discussions about the “old churches” are couched in terms of memories, traditions, generational connections, and the past, church members talk about contemporary Indian churches in terms of change, growth, development, and phases of a church’s life. This type of language reinforces the distinctive nature of these churches as new and interconnected (not through families or generations as much as interconnected through mission work, church planting, and cross-congregational support).

The following excerpt is from a discussion that I had with a Creek pastor who now commits his life to planting new Indian Baptist churches. He speaks about a time during the 1960s that he identifies as the point when Indian Baptist congregations opened up to the idea of change. I include large portions of his narrative because his account captures the details of a rather significant historical point at which “old churches” began transitioning into the styles of the “newer churches.” He recalls:

Well, I’ve seen the ages when the churches started adapting. I actually attended a church one Sunday where they said, “Today, we’re going to rearrange the furniture!” They took a break from service, and they said, “When you come back this afternoon, the pews are going to be faced like

this.” And then they were changed. Of course, there was some people that said, “Hey we want it the old way!” but it didn’t change, it stayed that way.

When you see those kinds of things emerge, you see them changing then for the good. I attended a community supper where they actually- that Sunday was the first Sunday where they was all going to quit drinking out of the same cup. Yeah, because in old Indian churches when they took communion, everybody drank out of the same cup, you know. That one cup for the whole congregation. Can you imagine that? And can you imagine what Indian Health Services would say about that? (interviewee laughs)

In the summer time, in the old churches, they only drank out of one bucket of water and used the same dipper. It may sounds gross to you but many people back then dipped snuff and chewed tobacco and stuff, then you’d see them drink out of the same dipper (he laughs). Well, if you came from the city and you saw that you’d say, “I’m not drinking out of that.” So it changed the atmosphere, the attitude, and the mood. So it would take a person getting away from that and then coming back. They brought the changes. It even happens at the stomp grounds, you know, traditional stomp grounds. There was a time when there was no such thing as electricity out there; it was all fire, lanterns, everything was open. Now, you’ll find refrigerators hooked up and things like that has moved in. Electricity is out there. So it’s not the old way...

The speaker here is making a point to say that the transition from the older churches to the newer churches depends on the literal (though temporary) displacement from a culturally rich way of life whereby new atmospheres, attitudes, and moods come to replace the old ways with new ones. The man’s larger point is one reiterated throughout the stories in this research. It is not to say that there is an inherent contradiction between Christianity and a native way of life. It is to say that ongoing, systemic processes of change in native communities everywhere produce spaces of contradiction, contestation and negotiation. Newly planted Indian Baptist churches offer a vantage point from

which individuals come to stand on, and sometimes against, the margins of contested cultural spaces.

Contemporary Indian Baptist churches are built upon a foundation committed to change. A pastor of a contemporary Indian church explains, "...To get people to want to be a part of the church, we've got to be flexible... That's what I'm learning. That's what the church is learning." Such flexibility manifests in many different ways. One way that newer churches must be flexible is in the process of constructing a congregation. Older churches tend to be embedded in a community with long-standing relationships between the congregation and the community. Newly planted churches disrupt this long-standing relationship in that they rely on a collection of individuals to regularly commute or to physically move into a community that is usually not their own to begin a new congregation from its infancy. Newly planted churches focus on reaching a target community, but must also rely on a small core group of volunteers to fill the pews in the absence of attendees from the target communities. The process of church planting demands flexibility, change, awareness, and concern for a target community of which most of the planters are usually not a part.

I have only superficially addressed the distinctions between the contemporary Indian-led missions and the "old" Creek and Seminole churches found in Eastern Oklahoma. These distinctions are not the focus of this research,

but they are critical for making the very basic observation that there are many types of Indian Baptist churches. A more thorough classification of Indian Baptist churches would certainly include a discussion of church types found throughout all regions of Oklahoma, and the nation more generally, as well as Indian Baptist organizations, college associations, women's and men's organizations, musical groups, and Bible study groups. I began this research with the observation that Indian Baptist congregations maintain distinct, if not disparate, points of attachment to native cultural practices. This observation is highly generalized and, indeed, inaccurate when considered amid the diversity of Indian Baptist congregations throughout Oklahoma and beyond.

Even a preliminary reading of *The Jesus Road: Kiowas, Christianity, and Indian Hymns* (Lassiter et al. 2002) and *The Seminole Baptist Churches of Oklahoma* (Schultz 1999) suggest the great diversity that exists among Indian Baptist congregations. These two titles also suggest that situating a study of Indian Baptist congregations in a tribally specific context produces two stories somehow distinct from one another. Indeed, the tribal context is important but it is the *local* context that is most critical to a discussion of contemporary Indian Baptist congregations. The process of native-led church planting can include tribally specific components, the use of a specific language for instance, but contemporary native-led church planting also involves intertribal, inter-congregational, and inter-institutional social environments.

My sense has always been that the newer churches, which I eventually came to differentiate as “contemporary native-led missions and churches,” are somehow distinct from the “old time” Indian churches, and somehow also different from any non-native Baptist church that I had ever attended. Newly planted Indian churches, by virtue of being *planted* in a community and all that entails, are markedly different from their historically established counterparts. My position throughout this work is that there is something unique and noteworthy about the work of contemporary native-led Indians missions and churches. The fact that members from these churches repeatedly direct my focus elsewhere towards things and people assumed to be more cultural only confirms my position.

The Native Christian Experience in the Literature

The Native Christian experience, particularly as it is negotiated within and between native Christian congregations, is typically treated as peripheral to the larger politics of native community life. Scholars recognize that, “The idea of a native Christian identity is both historically and culturally problematic” (Treat 1996: 9; see also Buckley 2002; Bucko 1998; Clark 2004; Dombrowski 2001; Kidwell et al. 2001; Lassiter et al. 2002; Shultz 1999; Tinker 1993). My own observations point to the contested nature of Christianity’s role in the Absentee Shawnee community that is Cornerstone’s target community.

The contested nature of Christianity, in my view, has less to do with an inherent disconnect between native people and Christianity. Instead, the contested nature of Christian institutions in some native communities has more to do with how “fundamental antagonisms emerge and become embedded within native social systems” over time (Sider 1993: 15). Acknowledging the contested nature of native Christian mission work offers new ways for thinking about how different types of native communities respond to a colonial past, on the one hand, while continually negotiating a position in contemporary community settings.

Indian Christian churches in North American native communities represent complex sites for the negotiation of membership in contested cultural spaces. Conventional anthropological and historical thought presumes that these churches represent the product of a distinct colonial history and assimilationist policies. These highly problematic perspectives tend to characterize Christianity in native communities as an implicit application of dominant power and ideology, situating the phenomenon of a “Native Christianity” within an elusive hegemonic power structure.

Approaches to Native Christianity that have gained prominence over time include models of assimilation and acculturation (Fenton 1953; Howard 1981; Linton 1940; McLoughlin 1994), histories of the mission experience (Axtell 1985; Beaver 1966; Devons 1992; Kidwell 1995; McLoughlin 1994; Tinker 1993; Wade 2008), revitalization movements (Linton 1943; Harkin 2004;

Wallace 1958, 1970), and models of syncretism (Buckley 2002; Bucko 1998; David Ortiz 1999; Howard and Lena 1984; Kidwell 1995; La Barre 1989; Lassiter et al 2002; Schultz 1999). Each of these frameworks, at some point in their application, rests on the relationship between a dominant religious tradition and an indigenous, 'authentic' religious tradition.

Syncretic models are particularly ineffective in the context of this research because it is precisely the church's marginal position relative to the community and its cultural institutions that ensures its continuations. In other words, the church's distance from traditional Shawnee practices (and vice versa) is advantageous towards its position in the community if only because such separation helps to keep the balance, so to speak. Personal stories offered in chapter five underscore the difficulty for those who attempt to practice traditional Shawnee activities in any partial way. Partiality in belief and practice says something of one's commitment to their families, their community, and their responsibilities beyond this world.

Models of syncretism suggest that Christianity is more desirable, or at least tolerable, for native people who successfully incorporate it into their

existing repertoire of cultural practices.¹⁷ This is problematic in the specific context of this research, and more generally, for two reasons. First, the cultural practices of the Absentee Shawnee, including ceremonial dances, funerals, namings, and other traditional cultural forms, are conducted according to fairly strict and longstanding conventions. There are certainly observable degrees of mixing, *per se*, with other cultural traditions. Practices common among peyote practitioners, such as sipping a small amount of water prior to a meal, is often incorporated in otherwise ‘Shawnee cultural practices’ like funeral feasts. Peyote ways are not generally seen as traditional Shawnee ways, but peyote practices have been incorporated into the broader Shawnee ceremonial repertoire in locally appropriate and meaningful ways.

Despite occasional mixing of cultural practices, these variations usually occur according to familial and social networks and do not occur uniformly. With a few exceptions, attempts to mix components of different cultural traditions are often met with disapproval or tentativeness. Traditional Shawnee funerals are occasionally conducted in conjunction with other religious

¹⁷ There is a palpable sense of “anti-syncretism” in the missiology literature (see Zehner 2005). Consider the definition of syncretism found in the Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions: “the replacement or dilution of the essential truths of the gospel through the incorporation of non-Christian elements” (Moreau 2000:924). Contextualization and indigenization are gaining traction among some Christian mission workers. These concepts, whose meanings in missiology literature are quite distinct from their usage in indigenous political movements, promote a method of church planting that, according to International Mission Board vice-president Gordon Fort, shape “the new church in its most indigenous form” thereby allowing “new believers to grow within a cultural framework that is true to biblical foundations” (Baptist Press, <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?id=26854>, accessed July 1, 2010). The concept of contextualization is more favorably received among some Baptist missionaries who otherwise feel that some syncretic approaches to missions excessively promote cultural conformity and tolerance at the expense of Biblical integrity.

traditions (usually another tribal tradition or Christian-based practices), but such occasions are nearly always followed by local commentary on the matter.

A second problem with syncretic models in the context of this research is the inaccessibility of certain cultural practices for some native people.

Researchers are careful to acknowledge the diversity of cultural practices between native communities, but it is also worth noting the diversity of experiences within seemingly insulated native communities. The tribe-centered social model that is embedded in the tradition of Native American ethnography tends to inhibit our view of native communities as anything other than intact, homogenous entities, distinct only from each other.

Inherent in many of the above frameworks, as noted by Lisa Philips Valentine in her study of Severn Ojibwe discourse, is that, “White, Western society, particularly the academic community [defines] Nativeness on the basis of being ‘not White’ and have created often artificial boundaries between what is White and what is Native” (1995: 164-165). Ethnographic examples focusing on Christianity in contemporary native communities suggest that the native Christian experience continues to complicate the artificial boundaries between “what is White and what is Native,” for both native people and scholars alike. It is critical for the advancement of Native American ethnography to accept the diversity of the native experience within native communities, and the inaccessibility of the so-called “native experience” for so many native people.

At the heart of many current approaches to Native Christianity is the paradoxical relationship between cultural change and native identity; entire communities are classified as culturally conservative or culture-less according to a perceived commitment to arbitrarily defined cultural institutions. To understand fully how ideas of cultural competency are appropriated as markers of native identity, attention must be given to the “historical motion *within* [and between] native North American societies” (Sider 1993: 15). Future studies of Native Christianity must not accept as authentically “native” only those forms of Christianity infused with recognizably “native” symbols, without also questioning the very paradigms being used to assign singular notions of authentic “indigeneity” to diverse native populations.

While a number of recent ethnographic works deal with the “deeper experiential complexities” that emerge in local manifestations of Native Christianity, it is noteworthy that many of these works deal almost exclusively with community-specific musical traditions and other performative forms of cultural expression (Lassiter et al. 2002: 115; Cavanaugh 1992; Draper 1982; McElwain 1990; McNally 2000; Valentine 1995). This limited focus on community-specific forms of performative expression averts attention away from native Christian congregations as viable players in the political and social contests that often transcend community boundaries.

The decades following the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 are an important point of departure for those interested in the many ways that the native Christian experience intersects with the diversity of life conditions in native communities in the last century. Another work to be included in a survey of the contemporary native Christian experience is Valerie Lambert's article "Native Spiritual Traditions and the Tribal State" (2000). This contribution assesses the role of tribal states and nation-building projects and their relationship to notions of Native Christianity and spirituality. Specifically, Lambert looks at how the process of nation building for the Oklahoma Choctaw served as a new source of conflict for native spiritual identification. Lambert analyzed the public discourse of Oklahoma Choctaw tribal political administrations to establish patterns of public support and rejection of traditional spiritual practices.

Two recent contributions that explore Native Christianity as a politically powerful force in contemporary social movements is Andrea Smith's *Native Americans and the Christian Right: The Gendered Politics of Unlikely Alliances* (2008) and James Treat's *Around the Sacred Fire: Native Religious Activism in the Red Power Era* (2003). Smith's book is particularly useful because it treats both Evangelical Christian groups and Native American organizations as complex and motivated entities, thus broadening the spectrum of those who are actively "seeking political and social transformation" (Smith 2008: xi). Smith

explores the unexpected and astute mechanisms for achieving political goals through seemingly disparate organizational structures.

James Treat's *Around the Sacred Fire: Native Religious Activism in the Red Power Era*, a politically informed examination of the Indian Ecumenical Conference, details the "contest between modern traditionalism and its polar alternative, assimilative progressivism and obstinate conservatism" (2003:296). This book is a welcome addition to the literature on indigenous movements because it explores Native Christianity in a theological framework and recognizes Native Christianity as a form of cultural and social expression that is capable of political engagement at tribal, regional and transnational levels.

Kirk Dombrowski's *Against Culture: Development, Politics, and Religion in Indian Alaska* (2001) is also a thorough and worthwhile analysis of the intricacies involved in the making and remaking of a collective identity that can work both for and against its members. Dombrowski's interest in those who act "within and against" culture reflects Gerald Sider's notion of *experience* as something that is constructed "both from and against one's changing specificity" (Sider 1997: 63). *Against Culture* examines the Pentecostal churches in Southeast Alaska native villages as a distinct space for church members to actively and antagonistically stand outside or against their native culture. It also explores a complex space within a native community in which differences of class, cultural commitment, economic position and political power

contribute to ongoing contests over the nature of native identity. Tensions inherent in all communities are both levers for dealing with everyday struggles, and specific responses to the many failures and inabilities to act successfully and powerfully as “natives” in other domains.

Scholars of native religion have long debated the role of Christianity in the lives of native peoples. The “Indian Christian problem,” so to speak, reminds us that those participating as native Christians are assumed to be, as Treat points out, “heretical, inauthentic, assimilated, and uncommitted; [Indian Christians] have long endured intrusive definitions of personal identity and have quietly pursued their own religious visions” (1996:9). I do not know if Indian Christians today are indeed *quietly* pursuing their own religious visions. My sense is that at least Indian Baptists are proactively working to forge a more public and forceful presence in the state and beyond. Unfortunately, Native American ethnography unintentionally treats Native Christianity as *peripheral* to the larger politics of local native identity, and *ineffectual* in contemporary efforts to forge mutual relations between indigenous communities and nation-states.

Many existing perspectives for situating Native Christianity in cultural and historical frameworks are arguably provocative and alluring, yet they lack contemporary relevance in most native communities, and fail, generally, to recognize the complex nature of native agency in colonial and neocolonial social history. This is not to say that specific histories of subjugation and oppression

are irrelevant. Indeed, as Clara Sue Kidwell, Homer Noley and George Tinker remind us, “The degree to which Christianity represents a rejection of Native traditions is a function of history. It is also a function of changing models of what constitutes culture.” (2001:10). Rather, a more complete understanding of Christianity’s role in contemporary native communities should explore the intricacies of *active* power structures, and the constraints of social and cultural positioning through which power manifests.

My work on Indian Baptist church planting commits to the latest trend in Native American ethnography to offer highly localized treatments of Native American life while also offering sophisticated treatments of deeply complex social processes (Strong 2005:254). This work also contributes to broader discussions in the anthropology of religion, and the anthropology of Christianity specifically, by considering the processes by which power creates “the conditions for experiencing the truth” (Asad 1993: 35). The power I am interested in here is the power of dominant discourses to condition the engagement of social subjects within and across subject positions.

The discourse of cultural conservatism (discussed further in chapter four) produces a limited number of subject positions in which church planters can occupy, including “insider/outsider,” “local/non-local,” “Indian/non-Indian,” and others. These subject positions are highly generalized, but they are also defined in exclusive terms. The exclusivity of these subject positions means that the

more desirable of these positions for church planters- insider, local, Indian- are not necessarily the most accessible. The ability of church planters to articulate and invest in the less accessible subject positions rests on their ability to discursively navigate multiple positions.

Jesus Christ, as church members profess, is *the way, the truth, and the life* (James 14:6, KJV). The stories of native church planting presented here underscore how the conditions that allow for native people to experience the truth of Jesus Christ are, in some cases, the same conditions that bring some native people to position themselves on the margins of local culture. “Not everyone who is local,” as Talal Asad reminds us, “has the same opportunity for movement” (1993: 8). Church members are both local and nonlocal, but this distinction is less about essence as it is about *movement* and the conditions of power that allow or prevent movement among social positions (see Asad 1993: 8).

These stories present the daily lives of church members who actively mediate the expectations and limitations of their own marginal subject positions. The stories here evoke issues that are relevant to broader anthropological interests, including the reconceptualization of *the local* as a unit of analysis, movements among subject positions, and the process by which truth is conditioned and experienced through the power of discourse. An important step for studies of the native Christian experience, and the Christian experience more

generally, is to contribute to the formalization of anthropological studies of Christianity.

Locating Relevance in the Anthropology of Christianity

The Anthropology of Christianity is not yet a well-established area of investigation in the discipline of anthropology (as compared to the Anthropology of Islam, for example). Christianity and the discipline of anthropology are intertwined in many ways and a fallacy within the discipline is the assumption that, “Christianity is an ‘obvious’ or ‘known’ phenomenon that does not require fresh and constantly renewed examination” (Cannell 2006: 3). Anthropology’s “disciplinary neglect of this particular faith” (Coleman 2008: 40) makes sense from the perspective that anthropologists have long attempted to embed themselves in studies of the exotic, the other, and the unheard; Christian communities, despite their diversity, did not qualify.

The idea of ethnographic observation, not to mention *participant* observation, in Christian communities incites a palpable sense of unease for many anthropologists, some of whom do not hesitate to empathize with even the

most “repugnant cultural others” (Harding 1991; see also Cannell 2006:4).¹⁸ My own experiences working in communities who subscribe to an evangelical Christian tradition suggest that there are a number of methodological and ethical questions yet to be worked out in the anthropological treatment of Christian communities.

A fruitful place to begin is the reconceptualization of Christian communities as important, even if challenging, sites for ethnographic investigation. Anthropological categorizations of “Christians” are themselves products of discursive practices, and yet anthropologists largely refrain from using “antiorientalizing tools of cultural criticism” to reveal how “cultural ‘others’ are constituted by discourses of race/sex/class/ethnicity/colonialism but not...Christian religion” (Harding 1991: 375). What does it say about the state of anthropology, and anthropological studies of religion more generally, if the subject of Christianity and the deliberate study of Christians continues to prove unsettling for many anthropologists?

¹⁸ Others suggest that working with Christian evangelicals is particularly risky because their familiarity with “research” and “anthropology” means that they are capable of “assimilating the ethnographic project into their own activities” (Lurhmann in Coleman 2008: 43). I find this particular argument against the serious study of Christianity to be preposterous. First, this argument completely ignores the history of ethnographic projects serving the interests and agendas of the researchers and/or research institutions. Secondly, the field of applied anthropology (and applied linguistics) has an established record of collaboration between researchers and communities who use the contributions of each other for political, personal, and other reasons. Suggesting that evangelical Christians are somehow more aware or more capable of employing the potentials of ethnographic research is to assume that previous ethnographic “subjects” were not as capable or that anthropologists themselves should only be privy to the potential benefits of research.

Is the discipline of anthropology ready to engage with Christianity as a “cultural logic” in its own right (Tomlinson and Engelke 2006)? One way to engage the anthropological study of Christianity is to use a dialogic approach that shifts concern away *from* the problem that Christianity poses to anthropologists and *to* the problems posed by Christianity to Christians themselves (Garriott and O’Neill 2008: 383). Indeed, there are reasons to think that the anthropological study of Christianity is fast becoming one of the most relevant and fruitful fields of anthropological investigation (Bialecki et al 2008; Cannell 2006; Engelke and Tomlinson 2006; Lampe 2010).

“Encounters between anthropology and evangelicalism” writes Simon Coleman, “are occurring at a time when evangelicalism is once again contesting Western (and other) spaces of public, intellectual and civil discourse” (2008: 44). Webb Keane suggests that Christianity be understood as a “social fact,” or as “ideas, institutions, social formations, political identities, hopes, desires, fears, norms and practices” that exist for a “remarkably large and varied number of people” (2007:29). I could not agree more with Keane’s assertion that, “...aspects of Christianity form part of the background...of many self-consciously secular projects” (2007:31). The pervasiveness of the Christian faith, and the unexpected ways in which it becomes meaningful in the lives of followers and nonbelievers alike, means that the serious study of Christianity

could reinvigorate anthropological endeavors that otherwise overlook its significance.

The anthropology of Christianity is particularly ripe for contributing to a better understanding of issues related to cultural change and social rupture. Certainly, issues of cultural change have long shaped our theoretical foundations in the discipline, and yet Joel Robbins suggests that there is a tendency within anthropology to reinforce the *conservative* forces of change and the *timelessness* of enduring cultures (2007). Robbins suggests that anthropology's long held concern with cultural continuity, marked by the persistent difficulty of anthropologists to adequately deal with change, "renders Christian cultures (particularly those in places that have not historically been Christian) particularly hard for anthropologists to recognize and describe" (2007:6). Robbins identifies "continuity thinking" as the major impediment to the serious anthropological study of Christianity (Robbins 2007). I attempt to strike a balance somewhere between the meaningfulness of cultural ruptures, or the points at which discourses of "culture" are no longer accessible or meaningful to some, and the powerful ways that discourses of cultural conservatism continue to shape communities in important ways.

Studies of change in Christian communities are often couched in broader discussions of modernity, but usually in depth studies of change in Christian communities is relegated to the process of conversion (Bialecki et al. 2008;

Cannell 2006; Robbins 2004, 2007). Studies of conversion are prominent in the literature on Christianity (Hefner 1993). Perhaps the topic of conversion is the most obvious place to begin a discussion about change in the context of Christianity; conversion denotes the transformation from one way of life to another, it is what orients new believers into participation in a Christian way of life, and it is the most exact point at which a born-again Christian identifies for themselves what is and is not to be included in the narrative of their life.

What happens to a discussion of the Christian experience when it is not framed by conversion? A focus on church planting enables a diachronically rich perspective on Native Christianity that goes beyond the conventional experiences of conversion that overwhelm the existing literature. An emphasis on conversion as a singular moment and publicly professed activity fails to take notice of the long-term commitments and private convictions of those who commit their lives to church planting. Second, an emphasis on conversion detracts from the more mundane, though nonetheless significant, efforts of the church and its congregations that otherwise contribute to their own notions of success and effectiveness in the fulfillment of God's work.

I believe that the stories of native-led church planting here offer a great deal to broader anthropological discussions of Christianity. Consider the following shortcoming within the anthropological interest in Christianity:

...With honorable exceptions, anthropology has tended to come at the problem of the significance of Christianity rather simplistically, and has

even tended to view it as a homogeneous thing, often covered by the label “the church,” whose main distinguishing feature is taken to be its hostility to local patterns of understanding and behavior... [Cannell 2006: 12]

The idea that the anthropology of Christianity has too often relegated Christian experiences and the Christian faithful to a homogeneous entity is not too different from the tradition within anthropology to treat the Native Christian experience as the yielding of an entire population to an elusive, hegemonic power structure. Indeed, the story of native-led church planting reminds us that complexities arise within and between communities, and the distinctions that exist within native communities (sometimes between Christian and non-Christian peoples) can have, at once, everything and nothing to do with being Christian.

II. Faith in the Field: Notes from an Uncommitted Anthropologist

*Pull me out of the net which they have secretly laid for me,
For You are my strength.
Into Your hand I commit my spirit;
You have redeemed me, O LORD God of truth (Psalm 31:4-6, NKJV).*

My research initially set out to ask broad questions about the nature of native-led church planting. Eventually, my research questions narrowed to account for how the process of church planting challenges local boundaries, and how membership in the cultural institutions of target communities becomes increasingly out of reach for those who commit their lives to the work of church planting. I began talking with members of Cornerstone Indian Baptist Church and soon realized that church members stories evoked relationships, places, and histories that extended beyond the walls of Cornerstone and outside the boundaries of Little Axe. I had sought to capture the growth of a single, newly planted church in a single target community, but the answers to my initial questions were broader than the life of only a single church.

Limiting my experiences to a single church in a single community did not mirror the complicated ways that native church planters live within and between target communities. Church planters, by virtue of the work that they do, leave their home communities, they enter new communities, they leave their home churches, and they assist in growing new churches. Church planting requires movement between communities and between congregations. While my

time at Cornerstone allowed me to understand the impact of such movement on the growth of the church, my position in a single church did not fully capture the implications of such movement for those who get caught up in it.

Despite the richness of local ethnographic data that I acquired while at Cornerstone, the full story of native-led church planting seemed hollow when viewed through the lens of this single-site. The things that I expected to see happening between the church and the target community (i.e. social interactions, mutual support, exchange of services, and resource competition) instead were happening in the context of cross-congregational interactions. Cross-congregational support is essential to the process of church planting.

Cornerstone, for example, emerged only after members from other Indian Baptist congregations in other places made the decision to transplant themselves into the community of Little Axe. I could not understand the significance of such cross-congregational support without stepping into the lives of multiple congregations. The ultimate position of every new church plant in their target community is contingent on highly localized conditions. Therefore, a more complete understanding of native-led church planting meant that I needed to situate myself within multiple congregations and their chosen target communities.

My approach to fieldwork, as stated in the previous chapter, follows in line with a renewed interest within the Native American ethnographic tradition

to produce intensely localized treatments of some aspect of Native American [life] coupled with a necessary interest in complex social processes (Strong 2005: 254).¹⁹ Church planting is an inherently multi-sited process and thus it proved to be a prime subject matter with which to negotiate a balance between doing intensely local work and socially complex work. The goal, particularly for propelling the field of Native American ethnography into a space of positive consequence for scholars and native people alike, is to be relevant. This is easier said than done, but it is my hope that my approach to fieldwork throughout this process has been both cognizant of the communities' desires and relevant to at least some within the locales where I worked.

Striking a balance between intensely local data and socially relevant network and regional processes created a research design that included an extended period of fieldwork with multiple congregations. A central component of contemporary Indian Baptist church planting is cross-congregational support. As such, my participation in one Indian Baptist church ensured that I had access to a larger network of churches. It was only through the relationships and activities of one church that I became introduced to all the other churches represented in this research. I will first introduce the primary congregation in

¹⁹ Strong (2005), Fogelson (1999), Parks (1999) and others claim that contemporary scholars of Native American ethnography are embracing the Boasian tradition of fieldwork that finds value in the compartments of daily life. McNally's ethnography of Ojibwe hymn singing, for example, reminds those of us in the business of theorizing that in an attempt to say grand things about the nature of macro social forces, "we cannot overlook the wild cucumbers" (2000: 20). The simplicity of this statement speaks to the importance of grounding ones work in the details of life that matter to somebody.

this research, and then I will introduce the additional congregations that came to also play a role in my research over time.

The primary congregation represented in this study is Cornerstone Indian Baptist Church (CIBC) in Little Axe, Oklahoma. I first visited CIBC in 2003 while working on my master's research about diabetes in the native community of Little Axe (Walker 2004). I attended this church at the invitation of a local Shawnee tribal member, and I eagerly attended in the hope of broadening my contacts in the field. My assumption at the time was that an Indian church located in the geographic center of Little Axe would yield promising opportunities to meet local residents in the native community. I maintained a presence in this congregation throughout the duration of my master's fieldwork, despite the fact that only a handful of local community members regularly attended this church. I continued to attend services at Cornerstone upon the completion of my master's degree in 2004. I enjoyed the services and had grown quite familiar with many individuals in the church family.

The church and its relationship to the surrounding native community struck me as unique in important ways, if only for the seeming lack of consistent interaction between the two. I was encouraged by others in academia to consider focusing on the topic of Indian Christian churches for my dissertation topic. I had been attending Cornerstone as a visitor for a few years at this point, and had

the opportunity to also visit many other Indian Baptist churches over these years (2003-2008). I began asking church members their thoughts about the church being the focus of a research project. I did not initially realize how my research commitments to these churches rested heavily on my willingness to commit in many other ways. This chapter describes my research design and methodology, and how both of these things became structured according to my willingness to commit.

Testing the Waters

I spent Easter Sunday 2005 eating lunch at the house of a church member after services. It was the first time that I had told anyone about my plans to pursue research on the local Indian Baptist church of which he was a member. I assumed most church members would be excited at the prospect of me focusing on the church, but I was less sure about this particular church member. He was a local Absentee Shawnee tribal member and had been raised in Little Axe. The native community in Little Axe is well known for being resistant to the idea of research, and extremely private about sharing family and cultural knowledge with outsiders. My new research interest was in the Baptist Church, and not the collective “cultural things” of the Shawnee, but poking around asking questions of religious significance could be risky.

After lunch I told the man, who had become a close friend, “I’m thinking of doing my next project about the church.” He offered no direct response. Rather, he finished some dishes, covered the uneaten food with foil, sat back at the table and began talking about one of the ceremonial dance grounds. I assumed that he was uninterested, or at least indifferent, to my proposed research on the Indian Baptist church because he began talking about something that I thought (at the time) was unrelated to the church. As he continued to talk about the dance grounds, however, I realized that he was carefully reworking a story he had already told me. He asked me, “Did I ever tell you about when I brought somebody to the Lord down here (at the grounds)?” I had heard the story of him bringing this man to the Lord or being saved a few times before, but now he was retelling it in the context of the ceremonial dance grounds. The dance grounds are a powerful contextual setting, and so suddenly this familiar story took on new meaning.

This man had always made great strides to talk about his Christian faith and his tribal responsibilities at the dance ground as separate, almost conflicting, aspects of his life. The fact that he responded to my research proposal by retelling this familiar story in such a way that made the church and the dance ground complimentary to one another suggested two things to me. First, he seemed to support my newfound interest if only by his willingness to start recounting stories at that very moment. Furthermore, I now think that his choice

of stories on that day was somehow meant to direct my focus toward the possibilities that the new Indian Baptist church had in this Shawnee community. The challenges had by a new Indian church trying to reach a culturally conservative community are easy to recognize; the possibilities in that situation are a bit harder to see. I think, looking back, that he hoped my work about the church would be open to the possibilities.

I formulated a research proposal, presented it to the congregation during a Wednesday evening business meeting in early 2006, and received unanimous support for the research from all present. Immediately following the meeting I was approached by church members with ideas, offers to assist, and full access to church documents, bulletins, and photos. I spent the next two years (2006-2008) participating in different components of church life at Cornerstone, including worship service, afternoon fellowship, Sunday school, Fourth Sunday sings, nursery duty, holiday decorating, business meetings, revivals, funerals, mission trips, house visits, flyer distributions, parades, fund raisers, weddings, and vacation bible schools.

Church members consistently profess the goal of the local Indian church is to reach the local native community, the “target,” in Little Axe. My primary field site started out as Cornerstone Indian Baptist Church, but then their “target” became my “target” so that my ethnographic interests focused on the relationship between the church and their target community. Therefore, while

conducting fieldwork in conjunction with Cornerstone Indian Baptist Church, I simultaneously maintained contacts and a presence at activities in the greater Little Axe community.

My presence at activities in the greater Little Axe community, particularly tribally specific activities, was the result of relationships forged with community members outside of the church. As mentioned, I had already conducted research in Little Axe since 2003 and had maintained a consistent presence in the community since then. My presence at tribally specific events was not as a representative from the church but as a “visitor” in its own right. I certainly made no secret of being a “church go-er,” but maintaining this status as my primary identity at tribally specific (i.e. ceremonial) engagements had potential to be problematic. For one thing, most community members had come to know me or recognize me as a visitor at community events before my formal attendance as a researcher at Cornerstone.

I had forged meaningful and close relationships outside of the church and was as committed to maintaining these as I was to maintaining relationships in the church. Occasionally, these relationships overlapped; most of the time they did not. The personal nature of some relationships in the local native community, including the formation of friendships, adoptive kin, and even meeting my future spouse, proved central to how I approached ongoing research in this community. In turn, I think that my relationships with members of the

church's target community conditioned how the church approached their participation in my work and its potential to contribute to their own efforts.

Formal collaboration with members of Cornerstone Indian Baptist Church (CIBC) for purposes of research about church planting began in the summer of 2006 and lasted until December 2007. As I came to understand the significance of cross-congregational movement in church planting, I then added two additional congregations to the research design, including Earlsboro Indian Baptist Mission (EIBM) and First Indian Baptist Church of Shawnee (FIS).²⁰ I began formally working with the EIBM congregation in January 2008 and stayed there for approximately six months. I then moved to FIS and completed data collection over the course of a few months.²¹ I returned to CIBC upon completion of data collection at these other congregations. I continue to attend services and activities at Cornerstone still, though no longer in the capacity of an active researcher.

²⁰ I intermittently spent time in a variety of Indian Baptist churches for revivals, gatherings, funerals, conferences and worship services, usually in conjunction with congregation members with whom I was currently working.

²¹ The amount of time spent at FIS was concise but nevertheless thorough. Prior to working in FIS, I had attended a six-week women's Bible study there while I was still conducting research at Earlsboro. Many members from EIBM were attending the study session and I went upon their invitation. This period of fellowship and Bible study allowed me to meet a number of women congregants from FIS, so that I knew several people by the time I started working at FIS. Additionally, family relations and social connections between all the churches provided me with invaluable resources as I transitioned from one church into another one.

Choice of Field Sites

I chose these three congregations as my field sites for a number of reasons. First, all of these churches already had established connections between each other as a result of the church planting process. All three congregations participate in a Partnering Model of church planting (see chapter three) whereby a more established “mother” church sponsors the growth of a new, “daughter” church. In this model of church planting, FIS is the “mother church” to both CIBC and EIBM, thereby making CIBC and EIBM “sister congregations.” These connections did not necessarily ensure seamless transitions for me from one church to the other, but time spent in each congregation added to the sense of trust and familiarity that both church members and I needed to work effectively and efficiently. Additionally, each congregation represents a different point of growth as a church, thus offering a sense of how and under what conditions new congregations become established.

The extended time spent at Cornerstone, as well as the more limited periods of time spent with the other congregations, offers a comprehensive snapshot of life in and around a contemporary Indian Baptist church. The life of a newly planted church is ever changing, so that the younger congregations of Cornerstone and Earlsboro experience more rapid change in membership than does the more established First Indian Baptist. For instance, I felt I had sufficiently interacted with nearly all adult members of CIBC following data

collection with this congregation. I returned to Cornerstone services following my year of fieldwork in other congregations to find that the congregational makeup had changed in substantial ways; new members had joined, some core members had left, families had grown, and personnel changes had been made. Data collection is constrained by time and deadlines, and so it is that the state of things presented here may or may not hold true for those in the churches today. A brief snapshot of each congregation as they were during my visits is offered here.

Cornerstone Indian Baptist Church

Cornerstone Indian Baptist Church (CIBC), the primary congregation in this research, is a self-governing church actively involved in both local and long-distance mission work. Cornerstone's congregation is fairly well established, despite ongoing fluctuations in attendance from week to week, and most of the key personnel positions in the church are filled. Average attendance at Sunday service ranges from about twenty to fifty total individuals, with almost as many children as adults. Cornerstone's target community is the rural Absentee Shawnee community in Little Axe, Oklahoma. Most of the core members of Cornerstone are not from the local community, but have transferred their memberships from churches in Oklahoma City or Shawnee. Local residents from the target community do visit the church on occasion, usually a single

individual or family at a time, but it seems that few of these visitors commit to full membership over time.



Cornerstone Indian Baptist Church, Little Axe, Oklahoma. Photo by author.

Earlsboro Indian Baptist Mission

Earlsboro Indian Baptist Mission (EIBM) was a fairly new mission during the time I spent doing research with its congregation.²² Key positions of leadership in the church (including pastor, song leaders, and Sunday school teachers) are filled but it seems that roles, responsibilities and dynamics between members are still being negotiated. Earlsboro's congregation is largely composed of the same core membership that began the church, as well as a handful of congregants that divide their attendance between EIBM and its mother church, First Indian Baptist of Shawnee. Average attendance for Sunday

²² Earlsboro is a mission under the sponsorship of FIS, but they celebrated their "Noteburning" prior to my time in the church and hoped to transition into a church before the end of the year.

service ranges from ten to twenty individuals, with Wednesday evening services usually having less than that.

Earlsboro's target community is the native community living in the area known as Earlsboro. The town of Earlsboro is situated just south of the highway I-40. Having secured a spot in the book *Ghost Towns of Oklahoma*, Earlsboro is described as a "broken hull" having "twice been a boom town...and twice a decaying, disintegrating, and dilapidated village" (Morris 1980: 75-78). The majority of native residents in the area today live in a tribal housing addition, though residents are not necessarily of any one single tribal membership. Only one family at EIBM currently lives in the Earlsboro community; nearly all other members live in neighboring Shawnee. Most of the current membership has previously held membership in other Indian Baptist churches, including Cornerstone, First Indian of Shawnee, Sallateeska, Sand Creek, and others.



Earlsboro Indian Baptist Mission commemorating its "noteburning," a significant step in a mission's growth into a self-sustaining church. Many of those in attendance are members of sister churches or Earlsboro's mother church.

First Indian Baptist Church of Shawnee

First Indian Baptist of Shawnee (FIS) is the sponsoring mother church of the two aforementioned churches, and yet it was undergoing a number of organizational challenges during my time in the church. The congregation is certainly the largest of the three congregations in this research (average Sunday morning attendance is well over 50-75), and yet FIS lacks a pastor and is finding it difficult to secure a replacement. Attendance and youth activities seem to be flourishing at FIS. The church that is touted as a mission-minded church, responsible for planting numerous missions across the state and beyond, currently has no leadership or resources for conducting mission work. The church's target is the general native population in the Shawnee municipality, although the church has long focused its witnessing efforts on long distance mission work. FIS is well known among native residents in the area, whether they attend or not, and the church's presence in the area seems to be well established. It is difficult to determine whether the noticeably stronger presence of FIS in their target area as compared to the presences of both CIBC and EIBM in their targets is a result of anything more than it being an elder church, it being situated in a more urban area, or it not having to compete as much with the local prevalence of traditional practices.

The Logistics of Managing Multiple Field Sites: Ethnographic Positioning and Methodological Challenges

My decision to incorporate EIBM and FIS as additional field sites to an already extended field duration at CIBC prompted questions about how to manage the length of fieldwork, the pragmatics of establishing rapport and contacts in new places, and managing commitments in multiple sites. The following excerpt from my field notes, written in February 2008, details my initial naïveté as I began transitioning from Cornerstone into other churches:

...My goal is to visit 3-4 churches by June, spending 3-4 weeks at each of them. I chose to approach Earlsboro first because I have casual ties to the church through a few members and the pastor, and because I have visited that church most frequently in the past. I honestly felt that the church's participation in my project would be nearly a shoe-in; I found out during my presentation to the church that this wasn't necessarily the case...

The idea that I would spend about three to four weeks at multiple churches is the biggest blunder here, closely followed by my assumption that any congregation would be a “shoe in.” The years spent at Cornerstone, both as a formal researcher and otherwise, created an incredibly comfortable environment for proposing my research. This was not necessarily the case at all congregations. My first attempt to promote my research at a new congregation launched me quickly back into “beginning” mode.

I first approached the congregation of EIBM about including them in my research on January 30, 2008. It was a Wednesday evening service and the

pastor informed me that I could present my research to the congregation after the evening's song service. Roughly seventeen people eventually occupied the pews, a larger-than-normal crowd for a Wednesday evening service at EIBM. I had visited EIBM on several occasions but I knew only a few congregants. The pastor introduced me to those present; most of them did not know me. He vouched for my general character by evoking some of the relationships that he knew I had with Little Axe residents. This seemed to help ease the concerns of some.

I did not go behind the pulpit but instead made my presentation on the floor facing the congregation.²³ I introduced myself, both personally and professionally, and explained how and why I was coming from being a 'perpetual visitor' at CIBC to wanting to now visit at EIBM. I tried to validate why I thought this work was important and why I wanted members of EIBM to participate in the effort. The pastor, sitting on the front pew, nodded and audibly approved of what I was saying; otherwise, there was little in the way of a response from the rest of the congregation.

I asked if anyone had questions or concerns about the research. Without hesitation, a soft-spoken woman in the front pew wanted to know exactly how I intended to "participate" in their church and, further, how I intended to commit to the church. Anthropologists like to think that concerns like these revolve only

²³ Previous experiences suggest to me that the presence of a woman behind the pulpit was a potentially contentious act, if not simply impermissible.

around the ideas of ethics, responsibility, and accountability to one's ethnographic subjects; lessons learned from the past suggest that the discipline now has adequate ways to deal with such concerns. My years working at Cornerstone, however, taught me that this woman's concerns had nothing to do with ethnographic representation or accountability to research participants. Her concerns had everything to do with my salvation and my willingness to do the work of the church.

This moment became the point at which I had to decide how I would position myself as an ethnographer in relation to the church and its members. The nature of doing ethnographic work in evangelical Christian churches meant that the extent of the relationship between church members and myself was, ultimately, dependent on my status as a Christian. Church members looked to me to disclose whether I was "saved" or "lost"; such information is critical for those whose work it is to reach the unsaved. Susan Harding's work with fundamentalist Christians talks about being submerged in the process of conversion simply by lending an ear as a researcher. Harding suggests, "Crisis, transition and upbringing as such do not lead you to convert" but they "make you more likely to listen" (2000:57). A willingness to engage in dialogue, in the assessment of those looking to convert, is a willingness to hear the Word of God.

I did not openly profess my faith for the first few years I spent at CIBC. In the interest of objectivity, I deflected questions about my status as a Believer

while working at Cornerstone. I sang the songs. I bowed my head, I fellowshiped, and offered prayer requests. Perhaps this is what any anthropologist would have been willing to do. Church members occasionally tested my competency as a Christian, either asking me to deliver the prayer or lead an activity. I regulated my participation at CIBC just enough to maintain the status of “visitor,” and yet my upbringing in Southern Baptist churches made me competent enough to conveniently “pass” as a potential member. My constant presence but unwillingness to join the church gave confusing signals about my faith. My faith and personal beliefs revealed themselves over time as church members came to know me, but the decision to add congregations to the research design meant that I did not have the luxury of time in every church that I worked.

It took years of being at CIBC as an “uncommitted visitor” to realize that professing my faith as a Christian to the participating congregations was essential to the ease of conducting research in Baptist churches. My attempts to maintain an “objective” position at CIBC became more manufactured than they were scientific. Franz Fanon writes that the search for objectivity for the researcher leads to merely catching hold of “outer garments,” simply the “reflection of a hidden life, teeming and perpetually in motion” (1963: 41). The search for objectivity is wrought with empty facades that reveal little about the histories and the relationships that matter in the end. In other words, the

ethnographer's search for objectivity cannot escape the ambiguities and complexities inherent in the social world. It is the recognition that anthropology as a discipline "has always contained within itself profound contradictions and ambiguities" (Asad 1973: 18) that I am comfortable with the idea that ethnography can still something useful about the world, its diverse workings, and our place as anthropologists in it.

It was a methodological decision on my part to begin work at EIBM and FIS by professing my faith from the onset. This decision did not hamper my ability to conduct objective or reputable research. Quite the contrary, conducting research as a believer meant that my salvation no longer burdened church members and they could carry on the work of the church as usual. I had figured all of this out between my time at CIBC and my time at the other churches. As the woman from EIBM expressed her concern about my commitment to their church, I answered her in the most honest way: my commitment to all the churches as a researcher was longstanding, but my commitment to all the churches as a potential member would only be temporary. The woman said nothing more about it and the congregation agreed to let me participate in their church, even if it was as an "uncommitted" congregant.

The limited amount of time spent working with both EIBM and FIS congregations encouraged me to enmesh myself in as many activities and opportunities for engagement as possible during the months that I was there.

Whereas I might attend morning service and eat lunch at CIBC before leaving to visit other community members in Little Axe for the afternoon, I made a more concerted attempt to stay at both morning and afternoon services while at EIBM and FIS. I took the time in between services to eat lunch with church families, make house visits, conduct interviews, drive around the communities, or sit in my car to write field notes. The months spent at these churches, compared to the years spent at CIBC, required that I stay focused on the task at hand.

The proximity of field sites to my place of residence also had an impact on the way that I engaged myself in the field every day. The community of Little Axe was only about twenty minutes from my own home, whereas the town of Earlsboro and the city of Shawnee were about an hour from my home. The proximity to all sites, on the one hand, made it possible to maintain ongoing fieldwork in conjunction with academic, work, and personal obligations. This constant accessibility to the field proved useful in the sense that I had the opportunity to engage in much more extended periods of field relationships than many of my graduate colleagues. Years upon years of doctoral fieldwork is at once a blessing and a curse, so to speak; over five years of fieldwork in the same area offers an intensely diachronic perspective for a dissertation. On the other hand, the proximity of one's field site to their own "everyday life" results in the amassing of data (to be processed but maybe never used) and the development

of local relationships that extend beyond work; both of these factors complicate the ideal of succinctness.

A Note about Data

Formal, recorded interviews were conducted with individual church members from both Cornerstone and Earlsboro congregations. Additionally, frequent and informal conversations were had with nearly every adult church member from these two congregations. A recorded group discussion and numerous informal conversations were conducted with individual members of FIS congregation, but time constraints prohibited the collection of formal individual interviews. The individual interviews consisted of a series of self-structured and/or semi-structured interviews. Most of these interviews took place in individual homes, but they also were conducted in places of employment, restaurants, and in church rooms. Semi-structured interviews are characterized by predetermined questions, systematic and consistent exploration of certain topics, and the freedom to digress from prepared questions (Berg 2001: 70). I chose to use semi-structured interview methods so as to retain a certain unstructured quality that is critical for achieving productive levels of comfort, a free-flowing exchange of ideas and possibilities, as well as a certain degree of reflexivity on the part of the interviewee and myself.

Nearly every formal interview was supplemented by an informal oral history component. The oral history component offered tremendous background about individuals' lives; this information was critical for understanding how individual church members became Christian, on the one hand, but also how they became church planters in communities of which most were not originally a part. Oral history information was occasionally collected at the time of doing individual interviews, but most oral history about people and places emerged while sitting on someone's back porch or driving along some rural road.

Oral history interviews are useful for collecting a diachronic perspective on a specific topic or part of someone's life (O'Reilly 2005: 128). This type of qualitative data offers "access to the ordinary unreported interests and tribulations of everyday life," while additionally being able to "draw [underrepresented] people and groups out of obscurity...repair damaged historical records and...give powerless people a voice" (Berg 2001: 221). Along with the oral history data collected in interviews with church members, I also had the opportunity over the course of years spent in Little Axe to collect immeasurable amounts of oral history information from members of the greater community.

One specific effort to acquire oral history data focused on the installation of the Norman Dam Project and the subsequent effects of Lake Thunderbird, a man-made reservoir, on the community of Little Axe. These oral histories, while

not pertaining directly to the life of the Indian Baptist church, greatly contributed to an understanding of local politics surrounding land loss, grave repatriation, race relations, economics, resources, and municipal expansion, as well as a more extended history of displacement among the Absentee Shawnees.

English is the primary language used in church services at all primary church sites. However, both English and Shawnee are spoken languages in the primary community site of Little Axe. All interviews with church members were conducted in the English language. All interviews with Little Axe residents who were not church members were also conducted in English, with periodic interjections of Shawnee phrases or conversation. Additionally, a substantial amount of ethnographic recording of Shawnee language was done in conjunction with participation in tribal language classes and more informal individual language instruction.

Actual names of churches and participants are used unless specifically stated.²⁴ There is a tremendous willingness among most church members to participate in this type of research, and further, to reveal personal and identifying information in conjunction with their stories. This willingness is not unusual given participants' status as born-again Christians. Personal testimonies about

²⁴ Actual names of tribal members from the target communities who are not church members are not used. This research was approved as an effort to portray the perspectives of the church planters and subsequent members of the church. I do not feel that I explored many of these issues at length with members of the various target communities, and I do not feel I can adequately anticipate the implications of using their actual names in their greater communities.

how God has transformed your life are at the center of the evangelical Christian tradition; offering personal and identifying stories to a researcher is yet another platform to tell one's testimony.

I completed formal data collection in the fall of 2008 and began the process of sifting through piles of field notes and hours of taped interviews. I continued to attend the services of all the churches following the completion of my data collection, although I maintained a much more consistent presence at Cornerstone than any other church. I would be content to continue attending services at any of the three congregations, but for personal and logistical reasons, I chose to continue participating in the life of Cornerstone Indian Baptist Church throughout the process of data analysis and dissertation writing.

Final Thoughts

During my brief time spent working with members of FIS, I received news that EIBM had suffered the tremendous loss of their entire church building to an electrical fire. Earlsboro had gotten to a point of growth where they hoped to begin reaching out to the local Earlsboro community, but the fire pushed these efforts back to simply maintaining the core congregation while they rebuilt. The Earlsboro congregation did not merge their services with those of their mother church, FIS, nor did existing members disintegrate their memberships back into

their former congregations. Instead, Earlsboro continued to hold church services in a public city building located only blocks away from FIS.

The course of events described above caused me to wonder if I had completely misunderstood the nature of relationships between Indian Baptist congregations. Should FIS not have offered some available space to EIBM following the devastating fire? Should CIBC not have sent their associate pastor to FIS until they could find a replacement pastor? Perhaps EIBM could have lent their pastor (and congregation) to FIS's weekly services until they both were back on track. These churches are planted according to a Partnering Model of church planting that suggests that new Indian works are founded upon a mutually nurturing (and enduring) relationship. This is largely true, and all of these congregations certainly provided me the opportunity to witness the wonderfully complex process of native-led church planting. The goal of these churches, however, is to plant the seeds of Jesus Christ among the lost. It is the growth between a church and its target community (and not between churches), ultimately, that fosters this planting.

I have come to understand that the primary relationships for newly planted churches are those that foster growth between the core members and their target communities. It is on this foundation that newly planted churches find opportunities to engage with members of the target communities that they otherwise have difficulty reaching. The nature of these relationships is complex,

and ever changing; many of these relationships are founded on familial and social grounds. Some of these relationships are founded according to needs that emerge within the community, and sometimes they emerge simply by “God’s grace.” The remaining chapters explore the complex, and often contested, nature of the interactions between newly planted churches and their target communities.

III. “They came one at a time”: The Burden of Native-Led Church Planting

*A little one shall become a thousand,
And a small one a strong nation* (Isaiah 60:22, NKJV).

Twenty years ago a team of native-led mission workers entered the community of Little Axe, Oklahoma with intentions to establish an Indian work. An “Indian work” is the general effort of mission-minded churches to plant, or establish, a new mission or church that specifically targets native populations. The community of Little Axe is home to a substantial Absentee Shawnee population. Mission workers who came to plant an Indian work in Little Axe contend that a great need presented itself here because the Absentee Shawnee “were really involved in other things, traditional things, stomp dances and Native American church...things like that,” but also because there was no other Indian church in the area.²⁵

The mission team’s direction for this Indian work relied heavily on the burden of a man named Sunny Stewart. Stewart, a non-Indian resident of Little Axe and pastor of the First Baptist Church in Little Axe (FBLA), explains, “My heart was always in the Indian work cause I was born and raised here.” His declaration of being “born and raised here” figures prominently in Stewart’s

²⁵ My queries about the need for another church in Little Axe were often met with rebuttals such as “but there was no Indian church in the area.” It should be pointed out that such statements reference the lack of an Indian *Baptist* church, but they rarely make any specific reference to other types of native churches, such as the Native American Church or peyote church, or any other form of native ceremonial worship. There is also an Indian Pentecostal Church in Little Axe, but members of the Indian Baptist Church make very little mention of this and do not seem to include this church in its repertoire of local Indian churches.

story, appearing over ten times in our one-hour conversation. Stewart's claims to being "local" are further reinforced by his assertion that, "I speak Shawnee Indian."²⁶ Stewart's vision for an Indian work was based on a need that he saw in the Little Axe community. He elaborates,

I don't think any of them [Shawnees] ever expressed a need here- about all I was ever told was 'You can't do anything with Indian people at Little Axe.' But see...I came out here and preached a revival years ago...and I had some Indian people saved at that revival. OK, so I knew you could reach 'em!...I preached a revival over there [in Norman] and we had some Indian people saved. I preached a revival up here at Stella²⁷, the old Stella school which is all closed now, and in that revival, my mother, my sister, my niece and a bunch of people were saved, and some Indian people, ok. And I realized, you can reach these people! They can, they will accept Christ...

Sunny Stewart, referred to by his brothers and sisters in Christ as "Brother Sunny," is a man whose charisma and eagerness to speak about the Lord competes with even the most popular Christian evangelists.

Our interview took place in a modest front office at the First Baptist Church in Little Axe. Stewart possesses a style of conversation that, as he describes, shoots "honest from the hip," holding little back regarding emotion, frankness, or viewpoint. A man of seventy years at the time of our meeting, he

²⁶ I once interviewed an elderly Shawnee man in Little Axe and he began telling a story that included Sunny Stewart, noting that he was a white man that could speak some Shawnee. Even slight proficiency in Shawnee language among non-Shawnee people suggests a connection to local Shawnee speakers, as there are no published Shawnee language-learning guides. There are a number of technical linguistic publications about Shawnee language, but none of these are particularly useful in learning Shawnee as a second language.

²⁷ Stella is located just north of Little Axe, and is historically considered a black community.

spoke boldly and without hesitation about the burden he had for witnessing to the Indian people in Little Axe:

My heart was for the Indian people- we won a lot of Indian people! ...We have 'em coming [to FBLA] now. But I always felt like that it would be great to have a regular Indian church. Some other groups had decided to try in days gone by, but I don't think they ever did it right, you know? You have to love them and accept them for where they are and with their religious -quote- background," ok?

Stewart's vision for beginning an Indian mission in the culturally conservative community of Little Axe was realized in 1989 when mission workers gathered to begin the work of planting an Indian Baptist Mission. This mission would become Cornerstone Indian Baptist Church, and it is the story of this particular church that follows.

Cornerstone is founded upon the burden of a few, but its growth as a church is the result of the cooperative efforts of many. The story of Cornerstone presented here is the story of a single, native-led church plant as told by those who commit their lives to doing the work of church planting and fulfilling the will of God. The individual stories of those who plant the seeds, and ultimately grow the church, reveal the complex nature of church planting as more than just starting a new church. The individual stories of the charter members, the transplants, the newly saved, the committed, and the conflicted speak to the deeply personal nature of this process for those doing the work and, in turn, also says something about those who become the targets of the work.

The story of Christian missions among native people today are more than the despondent narratives of Indian-white relations from the past. A focus on native-led church planting distances the process of native Christian conversion away from some elusive hegemonic power structure, and puts into focus the local negotiations of what is and is not tolerable within a culturally exclusive community.

The goals of this chapter are twofold: first, this chapter explores the process of church planting and the networks of cross-congregational support needed to grow Indian Baptist churches. This section considers the cooperative relationships between churches that prove central to both the planting and growth of a single church. Cross-congregational support networks are particularly important for newly planted Indian churches struggling to find impactful ways to establish themselves in their local target communities. The second goal of this chapter is to consider how the relationships forged in the church planting process create unforeseen opportunities for newly planted churches to grow beyond their target community. This section introduces the problem of being an *outside* (non-local) institution in a native community, and considers how the lack of traction in the target community provides opportunities for growth within the church, between congregations, and outside of the original target community.

A brief review of Christian missions in the Little Axe community is critical to understanding the historical context upon which Cornerstone Indian Baptist Church is planted. The historical tracings of Christian efforts to target the Absentee Shawnee in Little Axe are necessary for understanding how the process of native-led church planting today rests on the careful negotiation of uncertain resources, distant goals, and, at times, discordant local histories. The premise for understanding the current dynamic between the church and its target begins with the unsettled history of deep divisions between the local native community and Christian missions over time.

Cornerstone Indian Baptist Church has been a fixture in the Absentee Shawnee community of Little Axe only within the last twenty years, but it follows in a series of other native Christian influences in the community over the last sixty or so years, including evangelical tent revivals, individual missionary efforts, non-Indian and Indian Pentecostalism, Christian-influenced tribal political administrations, and Native American Church (or peyote) meetings. Each of these influences promotes highly disparate ideas about the role of Christianity in the local Indian community.²⁸ A brief historical sketch of these various influences is useful for understanding the local climate for and

²⁸ While early tent revivals and non-Indian missionary efforts prove to be largely irrelevant in contemporary community life, there is a range of Christian components in elected tribal politics and some Native American Church activities that seems locally acceptable and continue to figure into the life of the community.

against Christianity when Cornerstone began as a mission in the community of Little Axe.

Missions Among the Shawnee: 'The Kansas Period'

The most extensive literature on Baptist missions among the Shawnee covers the era of Christian missions established during the reservation period, also known as 'the Kansas period.' Shawnees previously living in both Missouri and Ohio ceded their lands, in 1825 and 1831 respectively, and agreed to move west to the new reserve in Kansas. Methodists, Baptists, and the Quakers each established Christian missions on the Shawnee Reservation in Kansas during the 1830s.²⁹ There was tremendous interdenominational tension between these missions, particularly between the Baptists and the Methodists, and these tensions directly effected their interactions with the various Shawnee factions on the reserve. The Baptist Mission, established under the direction of Isaac McCoy and later run by Jotham Meeker, had most of its successes among those Shawnees that had come to the reservation from Ohio.³⁰

²⁹ See Abing 1998 for a discussion of the denominational differences and competitive relationships that existed among the Methodist, Baptist and Quaker Missions on the Shawnee Reservation. See also Abing 2001; Isaac McCoy Papers; Warren 1994, 2005.

³⁰ Jotham Meeker operated a printing press on the Shawnee Baptist Mission, and he is credited with printing the first native language newspaper called the *Siwinowe Kesibwi* (The *Shawnee Sun*). Meeker and the other Baptist missionaries on the reservation believed that religious instruction in the native language was vital to prolonged success among the Indian people (Abing 1998: 124). Meeker's orthography and the native language printed materials had multifaceted implications for both the mission and the Shawnees. On one hand, the newly developed alphabet provided a means for political mobilization for Shawnee people "who recognized the growing necessity of negotiation with anonymous government officials," but it also "cultivated a new base of potential converts" and proved to be a "crucial move designed to increase numbers at the thinly supported Shawnee Baptist mission" (Warren 2005: 112). A single page of the *Shawnee Sun* is all that remains of this publication.

The Shawnees in Kansas represented a highly diverse grouping of politically autonomous and (previously) geographically dispersed factions of Shawnee people. The “institutions and rhetoric of Christianity” provided a means for long-separated Shawnee groups to again communicate with one another, thereby initiating a “national conversation” among the Shawnee collective (Warren 2005: 102). Despite this collective mechanism of Christianity, the missions had tremendous effects on the overall political and social structure of the Shawnee; namely, the older village-based system of hereditary leaders was systematically reworked into an opportunistic system of elected officials founded upon political alliances, status building, and access to mission resources (see Warren 2005).

The missions, as one part of the greater federal policy toward native peoples, prompted major changes in Shawnee social and political organization. Such changes, however, had limited effects on the small band of Shawnee that opted out of reservation life and were living south along the Canadian River. The Big Jim Band, the band of Shawnee that makes up most of the Absentee Shawnee in present-day Little Axe, traveled through Old Mexico and eventually settled in present-day Oklahoma while other Shawnee bands accepted land holdings on the Shawnee Reservation in Kansas. The Big Jim Band of the Absentee Shawnees was absent from the Kansas reservation during the height of the Baptist Mission. There is little reason to presume that the Baptist Mission in

Kansas had any direct consequence for the Big Jim Band of Shawnees, although a residual impact of the Mission in Kansas is likely among Shawnees who reacquainted with kinsmen following allotment in Indian Territory.

This chapter is not an exhaustive account of Christian missions among the Shawnee, or even a history of Baptist Missions among the Shawnee. This chapter explores Christian mission efforts among the Absentee Shawnee population, specifically in the Little Axe area, to understand the historical foundation upon which the contemporary Indian Baptist church has been planted.

Christian Missions in Little Axe: Targeting the Big Jim Band

One of the earliest Christian mission efforts to directly target the Absentee Shawnees in the Little Axe area was a mission started in 1897 by the Women's National Indian Association. After only about a year, the mission was transferred to the Society of Friends under the direction of John F. Mardock. The Mardock Mission aimed its efforts towards reaching the Shawnees living in the Little Axe area. The majority of Shawnees that first lived in the area known now as Little Axe were a part of the Big Jim Band of Shawnees, a faction of Shawnees notorious for their efforts to remain secluded from government oversight (see Chapter four for more). The Mardock Mission had difficulties in

reaching this particular native community. Reports from the 1901 Annual

Meeting of the Society of Friends indicate this struggle:

In the face of deep-seated prejudice on the part of many of their leading men against civilization, progress in this direction is slow, requiring the exercise of faith, patience, and perseverance on the part of our friends, but they find some encouragement in their effort and are hopeful of good result.

Despite the mission's efforts to gain traction with the local Shawnee families in the area, the mission continued to hold school, services, and meeting "attended chiefly by the resident white people."³¹

The Society of Friends established missions among many Indian tribes, including the Kickapoo, and Sac and Fox, as well as among the Absentee Shawnee living around present-day Shawnee.³² The Friend's work among the Big Jim band of Absentee Shawnee proved particularly difficult, as they were "to some extent non-progressive and largely adverse to the Christian



Mardock Mission, Photo courtesy of Oklahoma Historical Society State Historic Preservation Office.

religion" (1955: 175). While the Mardock Mission in Little Axe grew to be a

³¹ Minutes of Indiana Yearly Meeting of Friends, Report of the Associated Executive Committee of Friends on Indian Affairs, 1902

³² The Society of Friends established the Sacred Heart Mission in 1876 on the Pottawatomie Reservation, located in present-day Shawnee, OK, specifically to target the Pottawatomie and Absentee Shawnee tribes in that area.

central gathering place for much of the local white community, “the Big Jim Band continued to resist the missionary appeal” (Ragland 1955: 176). Written records suggest that the mission had little success in reaching its target community, the Big Jim Band of Shawnees. It is difficult to speculate on the ultimate impact that the Mardock Mission had on the local native community.³³

The Missions of Ted Reynolds: “Breaking the Bonds and Shackles of Ignorance”

Christian missionary influences continued in Little Axe following the inactivity of the Mardock Mission, particularly in the forms of small tent meetings and revivals. Central to the history of Christian influences in Little Axe is the story of Ted Reynolds, perhaps one of the most recognizable names associated with Christian missionary efforts among the Absentee Shawnee in the twentieth century. Reynolds’ legacy is one of a dedicated but controversial missionary figure whose desire to convert Shawnee people ultimately is overwhelmed by his fervent campaign to end the practice of peyotism in Little Axe. Reynolds’ efforts to simultaneously win souls to Christ and wipe out the use of peyote among the Absentee Shawnee continues to forge unwarranted, and

³³ Local Absentee Shawnee residents in Little Axe have told me that there was an Indian Mission that existed in Little Axe “a long time ago.” I am told that quite a few “older Indians” attended this mission, particularly during the winter months. It is not clear to me if attendance by local native people was common, but it seems that it was at least tolerated during the “down time” of the ceremonial cycle. I cannot say with certainty that the Mardock Mission is the same one attended by “the older Indians” mentioned here; I asked if the mission attended by the “older Indians” was the Mission of Ted Reynolds started in the 1950s, and was told that the mission in question was much older than that of the Reynolds Mission.

often disruptive, associations between his work and that of the contemporary Indian Baptist church.

Reynolds established an Indian work among the Big Jim Band of Shawnees in the 1950s.³⁴ Reynolds maintained at least nominal relationships with the local Absentee Shawnee people in as much as he, according to a letter he wrote to a Mr. Pitner in 1957, “lived among them or near them most of my life” (letter to Mr. Pitner, Ted Reynolds Papers, 1892-1987). Reynolds’ initial efforts to establish an Indian mission began in 1952.

Ted Reynolds sought permissions of the Absentee Shawnee Tribal Business Committee, the Area Director of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and Chief Little Jim to use the tribal Community House in Little Axe for purposes of establishing an Indian Mission. Local Absentee Shawnee residents in Little Axe used this community house as a general gathering place for meetings, assemblies, celebrations, and community functions. Reynolds suggests in a letter written in 1952 to the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) that the community house was in a “dilapidated, abandoned state...minus screens for the doors or windows,” exhibiting fire damage, paint damage and rodent infestation “because of lack of use” (Ted Reynolds Papers, 1892-1987). Reynolds assumed

³⁴ Reynolds, by most accounts, is identified as non-Indian, though an archived correspondence source from 1957 suggests that he was “one half Cherokee” ancestry (letter to Ben Hibbs, Ted Reynolds Papers, 1892-1987).

possession of the community building on June 15, 1952, and began holding services and other mission-led activities there.³⁵

Reynolds' mission existed under the auspices of the Little Jim Baptist Mission, the Little Jim Methodist Mission, the Maude Reynolds Memorial Mission, and the Little Axe Mission. The initial goals of the mission are quickly overwhelmed by Reynolds' personal pursuit to eradicate the influence of the Native American Church and the general practice of peyote use in the Little Axe area. Peyote use was an established religious practice among some Absentees in Little Axe by the 1950s, though it was only in regular practice among select families.

Reynolds, who reportedly partook of the peyote sacrament at one time, equated the use of peyote to witchcraft and devoted years of work toward its eradication.³⁶ He contended that peyote wreaked tragic consequences on the Absentee Shawnee people. The hills of Little Axe, writes Reynolds, "are dotted with the graves of innocent babies who paid with their lives by the mockery of God by those who eat peyote and practice witchcraft here at Little Axe" (Ted

³⁵ Reynolds did not have exclusive use to the community house at this time, but instead 'shared' the use of the building with other individuals and community activities. Willie Gibson, local Absentee Shawnee resident and ceremonial leader, utilized the building in conjunction with Native American Church meetings. Documents suggest that Reynolds and Gibson had ongoing disagreements about their mutual use of the building, though the main antagonism fueling the disagreements seems to have been Reynolds' severe contempt for the peyote practices led by Gibson (see Ted Reynolds Papers, 1892-1987). The community house building is still standing today and it continues to be used in conjunction with peyote services.

³⁶ The *Ted Reynolds Papers, 1892-1987* is a collection replete with correspondences sent by Reynolds to Senators, State Representatives, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, local and national newspapers, publishing companies, and professors. These correspondences document Reynolds' efforts to see the criminalization of peyote, and convince others of its harmful and demoralizing effects on the native population.

Reynolds Papers, 1892-1987). Reynolds provides the following account of

“peyote and witchcraft here in the vicinity of Little Axe” to the BIA Area

Director in 1957:

Peyote was brought to these people [some fifty years ago]. Within forty years, all livestock and farming equipment disappeared. The gross neglect of the land and improvements is beyond description. Peyote and witchcraft have debauched, demoralized and weakened and brought fear, immorality and poverty among these people. Our Mission was established in the midst of a people who were burdened with mal-nutrition, illiteracy and disease. This is the picture of conditions brought about by peyote and which still existed when our Mission was established...I feel sure that the Christian Church and faith will be here a long time after you and I and [the local Native American Church leader] have gone to our separate rewards” (Feb 9, 1957).³⁷

Reynolds’ position on peyote use is not particularly unique in the context of his profession, his faith, or the general attitudes of white society at that time. His fervent attempts to annihilate peyote use while simultaneously working to convert the local Shawnee people are interesting for purposes of this research, in that they speak to the delicate relationship that continues to exist between Christian mission workers and some local Shawnee families.³⁸

Reynolds used his pulpit to preach against the use of peyote. He professed that the Gospel of Christ could “break the bonds and shackles created by [the] ignorance of peyote eaters” (correspondence 1957, Ted Reynolds

³⁷ Reynolds wrote this letter in the context of a heated contest between himself and a local Native American Church leader over the use of the community house building.

³⁸ Included in Reynolds’ memoirs are documented examples of local Shawnee individuals making threats against himself and the mission, including acts of vandalism, slashed tires, and scattered nails. These threats, even according to Reynolds, are made only after he gets the newspapers to run articles about the demoralizing effects of peyote and witchcraft (Ted Reynolds Papers, 1892-1987).

Papers, 1892-1987). One Sunday morning in 1954 Reynolds preached a sermon from the third chapter of Galatians.³⁹ Reynolds instructed the congregation to make a choice between Christ and peyote, and they were “told that Christ and peyote will not mix any more than the sunlight of a noonday sun with the pith darkness of a starless and moonless midnight” (Ted Reynolds Papers, 1892-1987). Reynolds’ own writings, perhaps more than the recollections of local Little Axe residents, solidify his legacy as a fierce opponent of the Native American Church.

Anthropologist Leif Selstad had interactions with Reynolds during his fieldwork in Little Axe in the early 1980s. He describes Reynolds as, “bitter about the poor response to his church” (Selstad n.d.). He describes a conversation between himself and Reynolds whereby the elder reverend says, “I refer to the young people [in Little Axe] as ‘hushpuppies’. They are so busy keeping secret their tribal concerns and minding their own business, they don’t want anybody to know what they’re doing” (Selstad, n.d.). Selstad understands that tribal members keep their business to themselves because the “minority situation” in Little Axe then did not benefit the Indians (1986). Reynolds’ contentious interactions with local ceremonial leaders gave good cause for them to “keep secret their tribal concerns.” Reynolds’ Indian work, and his

³⁹ The sermon was based on the following Bible verse: *O foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified?* (Galatians 3:1, New King James Version).

unremitting stance against the religious use of peyote, sets a difficult foundation for future Indian works in Little Axe.

Nearly one hundred years of Indian missions underpin the planting of the most recent Indian work in the Little Axe community. This Indian work is different, however, because it is native-led. Inherent in the planting of native-led Indian Baptist churches are contests over the nature of native institutions, particularly as native ‘outsiders’ must work within and against the boundaries of their target community. The next section explores the components of a new church plant, and the networks of support that sustain new churches working amid unreceptive targets.

Planting a New Indian Work in Little Axe

I walked into the double doors of Cornerstone in 2003 and formed an impression of its position in the community. I stayed there for the next few years while I worked in the greater Little Axe community. I formally began fieldwork with the Cornerstone congregation in 2006, worked with other congregations from 2007 to 2008, and then returned again to Cornerstone in 2008 to find that the dynamic between the church and the target community had changed in significant ways since 2003. My understandings of the church and the community have deepened in time, but I know that actual changes both in and outside of the church have taken place. Accounting for all of these changes

would surely altar the final analyses in this research, perhaps in substantial ways, but these changes are lost to the deadlines of fieldwork.

I appreciate the writings of Smadar Lavie, as they gracefully embrace “the movement of...field experience into ethnographic text” as an utterly difficult process that is hopefully worth it in the end (1990: 35). Producing an ethnographic text about church planting is of great interest for church members, but it inherently involves a *target community* that may or may not want to be a part of a text that finds life, over and over again, in unexpected places. Church planting, like fieldwork, is an ongoing process with irregular intervals of growth and inactivity; Don Tiger, Cornerstone’s first pastor, explains that any point in the growth of a church is a good time to “start working that wonderful masterpiece that He’s got designed.” This text picks up somewhere in the midst of that “wonderful masterpiece” and, like Lavie, I hope it captures the “immediacy, flux, open-endedness, and fragmentariness” that is fieldwork (1990: 36). If the stories presented here resonate with even some of those currently occupying the pews of Cornerstone, as well as those who have come and gone, then I will have captured the *ongoingness* that is both fieldwork and church planting.

The church plants discussed in this research are all affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). The SBC and the North American Mission Board (NAMB), two entities that assist “Southern Baptists in their task of

fulfilling the Great Commission,” adheres to a fairly standardized process of church planting.⁴⁰ The Indian Baptist churches at the center of this research are Southern Baptist churches and are planted according to the standards of the SBC.⁴¹ Every new church plant begins on the basis of a specific burden, and a core group of individuals are prayerfully chosen to lead the church planting effort. Core groups organize, surveys are conducted, needs and resources are identified, outreach takes place, and services begin. Church planting is not complete upon the initiation of services, but a general framework for church growth is in place by this time.

The church plants discussed in this chapter are based on a model of church planting known as a Parenting Model, whereby a single “Mother” church assumes responsibility for the healthy growth of a child or “daughter” congregation.⁴² It is not unusual to hear church members employ kin-based language terms, such as “mother” and “daughter,” to refer to the relationships

⁴⁰ (<http://www.sbc.net/redirect.asp?url=http://www.namb.net/>), accessed March 22, 2010.

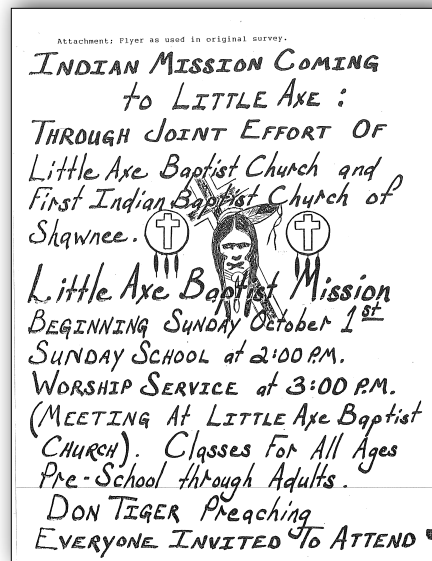
⁴¹ The SBC’s church planting website (www.churchplantingvillage.net) offers a number of published resource guides on the subject, complete with articles, videos, how-to guides, and success stories.

⁴² Another model that closely resembles the process of church planting common to Indian Baptist churches is known as the Partnering Model. The Partnering Model is a cooperative effort between many churches, often resulting in multiple sponsoring churches for a single church plant (see www.churchplantingvillage.net for further discussion of these models within the SBC framework). Parenting models and Partnering models are not mutually exclusive. Cornerstone Indian Baptist Church was established within a Parenting Model, although both First Indian Baptist of Shawnee (FIS) and First Baptist Church of Little Axe (FBLA) sponsored Cornerstone in the beginning. Interview material suggests that FIS is more often considered Cornerstone’s “Mother church,” perhaps by virtue of being an established Indian Baptist church, while FBLA is more often acknowledged as a local sponsoring church. Sponsoring churches agree to assist growing missions with financial and other needs. Although FBLA was the sponsoring church for Cornerstone, Stewart asserts, “we have never one time had to help them make a payment on that building.”

between churches. For example, a young woman explains to me that the life of a newly planted church is like “a little child trying to become an adult.” The growth of Cornerstone, by virtue of emerging from a Parenting Model, involves relationships with select churches. Its relationship with two such churches, including its mother church (First Indian Baptist in Shawnee) and a sister congregation (Earlsboro Indian Mission), appear throughout this chapter.

The Planting of Cornerstone Indian Baptist Church

On Saturday, September 16, 1989, mission workers from the First Indian Baptist Church of Shawnee (FIBS) and the First Baptist Church of Little Axe (FBLA) set out in pairs into the community of Little Axe. Using a map of approximately 142-148 Indian households in the Little Axe area the mission teams approached local Indian residents, passed out flyers, provided testimonies and gathered demographic



The flyer distributed to Little Axe residents by members of the original mission team.

information.⁴³ Mission workers from these two churches, most of whom admittedly knew very little of the native population in Little Axe community, canvassed the Indian households in the Little Axe area to determine the desire among residents for an Indian Mission. Mission workers then conducted a second survey in the area on the following Saturday so that they could “finish the survey of homes not reached” (Yardy 1990: 2). Following the two outings, the “expectation of the work was at a spiritual high,” and the responses to the mission teams were reportedly “profitable with many positive contacts” (Yardy 1990: 2).

Mission volunteers held worship services and Sunday school for one month in the kitchen area of the sponsoring FBLA church. The first official service of the new Little Axe Indian Baptist Mission was on November 19, 1989. Brother Sunny Stewart testified on this day, “That for many years I have prayed for such a day as this” (Yardy 1990: 3). The newly planted Indian Mission received its first local convert on this day of inception.

A man named Don Tiger, the first pastor of the newly planted Indian mission, recalls the powerful effect of the first convert on the young congregation:

⁴³ The majority of Indian households identified for the mission survey were based on Stewart’s own knowledge of the community. Stewart’s assessment of 142-148 Indian households likely includes Indian families living on trust land, private land, and outside of the Little Axe geographic boundaries. Stewart says that households “within what we felt like was driving distance of the area out here” were also included in the survey area. A 1976 estimate of Indian households reveals 67 Indian households in the Little Axe area, but these numbers reflect only those households residing on federal trust land (Selstad 1986: 29).

Our target was to always minister to the community, the Absentee Shawnee community out there, to the tribe and people. While we were there, uh, things were just moving right along...It wasn't very long after he got saved, his family...united with the church. This excited everybody. They said, "the Lord is just opening so many doors for us and this is where we've got to be." So that today is the present location of Cornerstone and how it began in its early years...

The native-led Little Axe Indian Baptist Mission eventually grew from a dependent mission having its services in the kitchen of its sponsoring church into an autonomous church on its own. A wooden sign that reads "Cornerstone Indian Baptist Church" marks its physical presence in Little Axe today, but the ultimate position of the church rests on its capacity to navigate within and against the cultural perimeters of the target Absentee Shawnee community. The story that follows is of the people who came one at a time, and grew the mission into a church.

Beginning a new Indian work first involves the assembly of a committed mission team. Mission workers insist that it is particularly important for these teams to include native people. Bill Yardy, an elderly Creek man who has devoted his life to Indian missions, cites a philosophy that is common for Indian missions today: "one Indian against another Indian."⁴⁴ He elaborates, "Our people are leery of Anglos; you got white skin, they may listen to you or they

⁴⁴ The premise behind this philosophy is that native people are more comfortable being approached by other Indian people. Yardy attributes this philosophy to Joe Ray. Ray, another central figure in Indian mission work, was pastor of First Indian Baptist of Shawnee when he was first approached by Brother Sunny Stewart about helping with an Indian work in Little Axe.

may not.” The turbulent, and often violent, history of Christian proselytizing to native peoples in the past creates particularly delicate work for native Christians leading missions in their own communities today.

My time at Cornerstone and other contemporary Indian Baptist churches, however, suggests that the majority of native Christians leading new missions are *not* usually members of the target communities. This prompts the question: do native people in highly exclusive native communities, such as Little Axe, respond to Indian mission workers on the basis of a highly generalized *native* identity? The native mission workers beginning the work in Little Axe in 1989 admittedly knew very little of the Little Axe community. Many Indian works emerge in response to the expressed need of a single resident (such as Sunny Stewart) or a perceived need in the community (such as the belief that Indians in Little Axe were into “other things”), but rarely in response to an invitation from the target community.

The work of Indian mission teams begins on a rather tenuous foundation. Despite the reportedly positive reaction to preliminary surveys in the Little Axe community, Cornerstone members recall a markedly different local response from local native residents who expressed resistance to the mission once it began. One mission team member recalls,

As far as people in this community, we can't get 'em to come but they know we're here. I always remember what that one man told me. He said, "We're just going to see how long... this church lasts"...

Another early member recalls a similar experience when a local resident made it known that, “The last church that was here...didn’t last very long.” Others from the original mission team recount stories of slashed tires, verbal threats, and mysteriously placed “bones or stones” in clothes hanging on a line.

These interactions evoke the confrontations had between Ted Reynolds and some Little Axe residents in the 1950s. Reynolds’ legacy of mission work, particularly his unrelenting assault on local peyote practices, continues to serve as a barometer for understanding local resistance to Indian mission work. The current pastor of Cornerstone situates many of the struggles to reach the community within the history of relations between the Little Axe community and various churches. “The problem we have here,” explains current Cornerstone Pastor Bryce Scott,

...is people have come in years before us and told people that you can’t be your traditional things, you can’t do that. You’ve got to do the church things...Now we’ve come in and they associate what was told to them years [ago] with what we’re telling them now, and a lot of it is not the same. But yet, they perceive it to be the same thing we’re telling them...

Selstad’s fieldwork in Little Axe in the early 1980s revealed findings that reiterate this sentiment. Commenting on Pentecostal missionary efforts in Little Axe during the 1960s, he says, “They want to convert the Indians to ‘Whitemanhood’, and when they have got that message across, the Indians stay away from their churches” (1986: 21). The struggles between the community and earlier Christian mission efforts are immaterial to contemporary mission

workers because the work of church planting, including the less desirable efforts of past missionaries, rests upon a foundation laid by God.

Foundational Narratives: Revealing God's Plan From the Ground Up

This section considers the importance of *foundational narratives*, or the narrative act of weaving together historically situated events with very personal experiences for purposes of revealing the glory of God's work. Church members recount the beginnings of Cornerstone in ways that reinforce the deeply historical nature of the church plant, so that even something as intensely purposeful as church planting is narrated in such a way that it seems happenstance. Foundational narratives are important to church planting efforts because they situate rather new community institutions (like a church) within an extended historical narrative.

Attaching a locally meaningful history to a young institution, while simultaneously intertwining it with deeply personal stories, places the young institution within the local history of the community. In other words, foundational narratives strategically narrate the history of new church plants in such a way that carves out a space for them in the historical memory of the community. Foundational narratives are an important addition to the study of narrative devices in the Christian tradition because they reveal the power of

narrative to mediate antagonistic histories and create spaces in which individuals can reposition their position in the life of the community.

Recall the assertion made by Sunny Stewart, the non-native pastor who had the original burden for an Indian work in Little Axe, that he was “born and raised here.” His personal story of being from Little Axe affirms the importance of being “local,” but it also sets the stage for Sunny to situate the church within a deeply personal set of historical circumstances. The story that he wants to tell about Cornerstone begins before Sunny was even grown. He tells me, “I want to share this with you, I don’t know if you want to use it or not. Use what you want.” This is how he explains the beginnings of Cornerstone Indian Baptist Church:

Because I was born and raised here and gosh, I can remember, my dad- there wasn’t very many white people out here growing up. They were mainly Indian people. But we were welcome, cause my dad didn’t mess with ‘em, ok. He learned early in life, don’t try to scare my family. He didn’t mess with ‘em. But he respected ‘em, loved ‘em and helped ‘em. We’ve shared food when they didn’t have any... that’s unheard of at least, what, 60-65 years ago! And that was going on out here. So see, the relationship was already there.

Sunny goes on to talk about his early preaching jobs, the years he spent “climbing up the ladder,” the pain of divorce, and the realization that no church would want a divorced man for a pastor. He says that he “probably would never have come out to a tiny church like [First Baptist of Little Axe].” He continues,

...but God had a way of putting me out here by myself...in 1984. I was going to church out here with just a tiny handful of us. They asked me if

I would serve as their pastor. Isn't that something? See how the Lord... probably had to humble me down... While I was pastoring that [other church in the city], running four or five hundred with full time staff people, I probably wouldn't have considered this. I'm just confessing my fault. And nobody wanted me cause I was divorced. Yet God knew about this all along and I didn't know about this, but He did. I don't see how God worked all that out.

His tales of personal tribulations quickly transition into a reflection on how such experiences paved the way years later for an Indian church.

And we have 25 acres that we bought....You can't buy no land out here, ain't none for sale! But God opened all these doors and that was just solid trees, and just cleared and cleared and cleared. Three different pieces of private land and we were allowed to buy them at different times- unbelievable! And we were land locked with Norman city limits, we couldn't build any more, we couldn't build any more parking lots, we were just here....we were in a mess. And yet the Lord began to open that over there. Anyway...I'm just kind of letting you see how the Lord is working.

This land was used for the expansion of FBLA and eventually for the grounds on which now Cornerstone stands. The acquisition of land in Little Axe, an “unbelievable” feat, is evidence that the “Lord is working” in favor of the Indian work. Perhaps more than his personal misgivings or professional struggles, Stewart’s story of land acquisition situates the church within a powerful local framework. Land is a source of contention for Shawnee people in the Little Axe community, as evidenced by stories about allotment and Lake Thunderbird. Cornerstone now sits on land that was once “Indian land”; this placement does not necessarily benefit the church, but it makes it conceivably more ‘visible’ to the target community.

Foundational narratives speak to the institutional beginnings of the church but, as a rhetorical device, they also allow individual mission workers to infuse their own life histories into the history of the church. Many of the original church planters of Cornerstone are not from this community, and some continue to occupy inconsequential positions in the community. Recounting Cornerstone's beginnings in such a way that demonstrates a personal embeddedness in the local history is a way for church members to stake a small claim in the life of this community.

Similar to *witnessing*, or the "plainest, most concentrated method for revealing and transmitting the Word of God" (Harding 2000: 37), the *foundational narrative* is also an effective rhetorical device to engage the listener while simultaneously affirming to others the will of God. The rhetorical strength of the foundational narrative for the believer is that it allows the speaker to demonstrate to others how God delivers through trials and tribulations. Foundational narratives of church planting are a *safe* form of testimony in that they appear to only trace the historical beginnings of a church. Instead, these narratives are deeply personal stories about the promises of God.

Susan Harding writes about the power of personal testimonies to engage the non-believer. She notes, "The willingness to submit one's life to God, to narrate one's experience and to fashion stories out of it in dialogue with God's will and biblical truths, makes God, and his Word, most real and known and

irrefutable to oneself and to one's listener" (Harding 2000: 59). In short, personal testimonies of seemingly mundane experiences reveal God to those who otherwise would not see Him. Church members say that our lives are merely a product of His plan, and telling others about the foundations of the church acts as a great testimony of how "God provides."⁴⁵

I use Stewart's story to introduce the foundational narrative because nearly every church member told me that any account of Cornerstone's beginnings should begin by telling of Stewart's burden. Consider the prominence of the foundational narrative in the following sections, as well as the more extended personal stories in the next chapters. The foundational narrative is only one rhetorical device used by individual church members who continually negotiate their own positions within a community that they so often live against.

Building the Core: Charter Members, Transplants, and the Local "In"

No *local* residents beyond Sunny Stewart came forward initially to start the new Little Axe Indian mission. Instead, native Christian mission workers were called from outside churches to assist the new Indian work. Don Tiger was called to pastor the Little Axe Indian Mission. Tiger says that he ultimately

⁴⁵ Church members frequently provide testimonies about the many ways that God "provides" for them in their times of need. It is often during times of intense loss or extreme hardship that church members profess all that they have been provided. "God provides" serves as words of encouragement for those who have yet to see clearly how they have been blessed, as well as words of affirmation among believers in recognition of His greatness.

“surrendered to the ministry” while attending First Indian Baptist of Shawnee. Tiger’s hope in coming to Little Axe “was to see Shawnee people come in and serve the Lord.” He quickly adds, “But it didn’t work that way. People from the outside started seeing the need, but I think that was good.” Those from the outside who came into Little Axe to grow the mission did so by leaving congregations that they were already a part, including First Indian Baptist in Shawnee, Glorietta Indian Baptist in Oklahoma City, and Sallateeska Baptist in the community of Johnson. Certainly, no *local* Absentee Shawnee residents joined the initial mission team. Core members who were Absentee Shawnee were either transplants, individuals who had left the community at one time and returned, or they were non-local residents of neighboring communities like Tecumseh or Shawnee.



Breaking ground for the construction of Cornerstone Indian Baptist Church. Included in this photo are members of Cornerstone, as well as representatives of First Indian Baptist Church of Shawnee and First Baptist Church in Little Axe. Photo Courtesy of Cornerstone Indian Baptist Church.

A personal calling to help grow a mission can be temporary, in which case mission workers return to their home churches or begin new works elsewhere. For some, however, the calling is more permanent. Each person who answers the call to stay at a new mission has their own foundational narrative, a story of how their journey to enter a community as a mission worker is part of God's plan. New missions depend on volunteers from a cooperative network of Indian churches. Volunteers are used to pastor, to teach Sunday school, to lead music, or just to provide general training and direction to the new mission. The ones who commit to stay become the *charter members*, or the core, and their stories are below.

Charter Members

Identifying the charter members of a new Indian mission is a highly selective process. Charter members comprise the core of the church. The process of acquiring charter members is mindful of the target community, gathering individuals who are committed to long-term work in the community, but the ultimate composition of the core group is built according to God's plan. Gary Hawkins, a native pastor involved in all the Indian missions represented in this research, says in a *Missions USA* article that an anticipated "hostile reception from the community" must be met by a core group composed of "highly developed spiritual lives" (Gill 1997:91). "Highly developed spiritual lives" is,

admittedly, exactly how I saw the core members of every church in this research. The core possesses a breadth of biblical knowledge, an unabashed openness to sharing the Word with others, and a willingness to profess God's graciousness in everything that they have and all that they do. Much is required of the core. They act as both the teachers and the attendees, they are the leaders and the congregation; they are what sustains the church from week to week.

Charter members are founding members who commit to the growth of the mission. Cornerstone Indian Mission was founded by only a handful of charter members. Some time ago I asked a church member about changes in membership since the church's inception. The answer surprised me: the same core families that began the church in 1989 were the same core families that I still saw at church every week.

Cornerstone's congregation size fluctuates from month to month. A core member of Cornerstone comments about the cyclical fluctuation in church attendance:

...We go good for a while. We get a lot of people coming and then somehow they quit. They move off. A lot of times they just move off. It just seems like we get more people from other towns that come to our church. Because we've had people from Cushing, from Chandler, from Noble, Shawnee...did have some people from Wewoka coming, OKC. They travel to our church. (interviewee laughs) We go good for a while then it goes down again.

Her statement suggests the importance of attracting attendance from outside of the community, in part because attendance by the local community continues to prove lacking.

The families out here, we used to have [an older Shawnee woman] coming but she's sick now. We used to have, well of course, [unnamed Shawnee man] comes off and on, and then, the [unnamed Shawnee family] ...they just spot visit, you know... When we have the clothes giveaway, they come out. They know we're there...just can't get 'em to come. It's very hard but Indians...they're very patient, they're very slow in accepting things and it takes 'em a long time. So we might be out here fifty years before we even see some of these families start coming that are strong in the Shawnee belief...

Her passage is striking because it suggests that she is well aware of the local lack of interest in the church. It is not clear whether her claim that, “Indians are patient” is a reference to the target community or to the Indian mission workers. In the meantime, Cornerstone thrives on the willingness of non-locals to support the church.

The core membership is critical to the growth of the church, particularly in lieu of any substantial local interest. My description of Little Axe thus far suggests that any attempt to begin a Christian mission here, even one that is led by native people, is limited by local pressures and minimal interest. I assume “local pressures” and “minimal interest” make for a difficult experience, and my assumptions lead me to ask mission workers about their struggles and

strategies.⁴⁶ On the contrary, consider Don Tiger's statement about the decision to lead the core of a new mission,

...I didn't have to sweat and toil as you might think you have to do sometime. It seems like God just laid it out already and I just had to step into it...even the financial aspect of it, God provided that to in so many ways...Cause the people were ready for something. No, they weren't coming in multitudes, and they weren't just pouring out of the woodwork and coming. They came one at a time...

The charter members of Cornerstone, and the church core that formed shortly thereafter, have mostly remained intact. The few core members who have left the church have largely done so to support new Indian works throughout the state and beyond.

The church core is a rather paradoxical entity. On one hand, the core membership is the most constant component of a new mission. Weekly attendance at Cornerstone wavers between twenty and forty individuals. Weekly attendance at Cornerstone's sister congregation in Earlsboro, in comparison, ranges between five and twenty-five individuals. The constant presence of the core reduces the impact of such fluctuations. On the other hand, the core membership is also one of the most impermanent features of an Indian church. Mission-minded Indian churches, or those with a focus on supporting new Indian works, always stand to lose core members to new Indian works.

⁴⁶ My line of questioning often reflects the assumption that minimal interest from the community equates to a difficult, and perhaps unpleasant, experience by the mission workers. Mission work, by virtue of winning lost souls to Christ, anticipates minimal interest at the same time that one must expect good things. Mission workers understand that resistance to the Good News is merely another opportunity to grow your own faith by staying the course.

The following story speaks to the nature of fluctuation in new churches, and the importance of the core in mediating these changes. Anne*⁴⁷ came to Cornerstone when it was a mission still holding services in the kitchen of the neighboring FBLA church. Anne identifies herself as Seminole, Sac and Fox, and Shawnee. She makes the point that she is not a traditional Indian, evidenced by her self-proclaimed lack of knowledge about traditional tribal practices, but she is a Christian. While she does not have any established attachments to a traditional way of life, namely Shawnee, she reiterates the traditional value of old Creek Baptist churches with which she is attached.

Anne, a former member of Sallateeska Baptist Church, explains why she left her home congregation to come to the new Indian mission in Little Axe. She says, “I saw the need out there and I said, ‘Lord,’ you know, ‘I’ve got something I could offer. I could help.’ So it was placed upon my heart and anyway, I joined this church.” The need she saw was that there was “an Indian mission but then there was no... Indian people to help build that church- as in teachers, even music. And it’s an Indian mission!” Anne explains that a new mission needs “fine-tuned Christians,” or well-trained Christians that are able to “give” the Word of God more than they need to “be fed.” Her statement references the biblical verse in Hebrews 5:13 that reads, “For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe” (NKJV).

⁴⁷ This is a pseudonym.

Anne gracefully exhibits both sorrow and joy with equal potency in her life, and yet she seems capable of “feeding” the Word of God to others no matter her own circumstances. She leads music at Cornerstone, and this gives her a platform to share testimonials of how God works in her life. She begins a testimony and the heaviness of her circumstances should be overwhelming, but she fearlessly hands her troubles over to the Lord. This is a difficult lesson for many to learn. She is usually the sole occupant of her pew, but she is nearly always there. She is what I understand to be a “fine-tuned Christian.”

Kelli Komahcheet, a close relative to Anne, is a wonderfully talented young woman from Shawnee, OK. Kelli identifies herself as Shawnee and Comanche. She has “the benefit of being raised in church” her entire life, and she cites the women in her family as prominent examples in her own walk with the Lord. Kelli, herself a single mother, is periodically overcome by seizures that put her in the hospital for weeks at a time and prevent her from driving. She has learned from the women in her family how to hand her troubles over to the Lord.

Kelli began to serve the Lord by playing piano at Cornerstone while I was attending.⁴⁸ Not long after Kelli began playing piano at Cornerstone, she chose to leave the church in support of the new Earlsboro Indian Mission. Kelli talks about her decision to leave Cornerstone:

I came to play the piano for the revival [at Earlsboro]. I really enjoyed it here...It was just on my heart, “I would love to be a part of

⁴⁸ Kelli is a self-taught piano player. She acknowledges her gift as a blessing from God.

that church and play the piano” ...At that time, I was a member of Cornerstone. I had been there since I was 12 till 3 years ago, when I was 25. So, long time. It was hard. I had to leave my church that I had grown up in to come up here to another mission. Of course, I had grown up with Cornerstone being a mission and going through all their changes and becoming a church- then coming out here to another mission. But it was good, everything worked out.

Her decision to leave Cornerstone and go to a brand new mission without her relatives who were still at Cornerstone greatly impacted both congregations. Her departure from Cornerstone encouraged other church members to serve in new capacities. Meanwhile, Kelli joined the current music leader at Earlsboro, her maternal aunt Patricia, in leading worship there. Her weekly presence at Earlsboro adds one more core member to a very new congregation; one person means a great deal during a Wednesday night worship service that has only four or five people.



Kelli Komahcheet (far right) singing with relatives at a revival hosted by Sallateeska Baptist Church.

Newly planted churches depend on the willingness of “fine-tuned Christians” from more established churches to transfer their memberships and help grow the new core. Just as Anne had transferred her membership from Sallateeska to the new Cornerstone Mission in Little Axe, Kelli was eventually called to transfer her own membership from Cornerstone to serve at Earlsboro. “I didn’t feel that sense of loss,” Kelli says about leaving her home church,

...because my worship was still here. I still had my worship. I still had my brothers and sisters in Christ. I was still getting fulfilled spiritually, so there was no loss there. And I still do see [Cornerstone members] and still fellowship with them, so there was no real sense of loss there. I mean a little bit...but spiritually there was no loss; it was being fulfilled.

There are no hard feelings towards church members who are led to serve in another church. Anne continued to serve in the capacity of worship leader at Cornerstone until she also received a calling to serve elsewhere. My formal fieldwork had been completed for some time when I learned of Anne’s departure from Cornerstone, and I have not spoken to her about her new commitment. Anne had been a core member of Cornerstone since its inception nearly twenty years ago, which is a substantial amount of time in the life of a newly planted church.

Transplants

Mission-minded churches expect their core membership to change over time particularly as more “fine-tuned Christians” are needed to grow new Indian

churches. While many mission volunteers eventually return to their home churches or move on to new works, new churches require an immeasurable degree of commitment of the remaining core. A process I refer to as *transplanting* minimizes the burden on the remaining core.

Transplants are church members who move into the physical boundaries of the target community, usually as a result of church commitments but also for other reasons. Don Tiger, for example, came to serve as pastor of Cornerstone at the same time that he also acquired a new job and home in the Little Axe area. Transplants include both people who have never lived in the target community, and those returning to the community after a prolonged absence. In the absence of church members from the local community, transplants are important for their willingness to submerge themselves in a community of which most of them are not a part.

The community of Little Axe sits along Highway 9, and is easily accessible for travelers going between the larger cities of Norman and Shawnee. Unless you are visiting locals, attending a local sporting event, or tending to some sort of local business, however, there is little reason to stop in the community. Transplants are particularly important for churches struggling to achieve traction in the local community because they become embedded into the community in ways not available to other church members living outside of the area.

Transplants often have a prior connection to the community. Kathy and Lloyd Deere, charter members of Cornerstone, moved from the Shawnee area into the community of Little Axe only after attending church at Cornerstone for some years. Kathy has family connections that run deep in the Little Axe community, and had even lived in the community as a child. She says,

...Even though I'm from out here, I really- I left here when I was a child, probably 5, 6 years old. We moved to the city and that's where I was raised. So really, I didn't know too much in this area. I mean- everybody knew me because they remembered me, you know, when I was a kid. But, I wasn't raised out here at all...

As this excerpt suggests, transplants are not recognized as *local* community members solely because of their local residence. The local status of a transplant, particularly one that has left the community and returned as a mission worker, remains tenuous and partial.

The Absentee Shawnee community in Little Axe maintains rather restrictive social and cultural boundaries as it is, making it difficult for most anyone to seamlessly leave the community structure and return years later. Many of the social boundaries in Little Axe, as described in the next chapter, are defined according to an insider/outsider distinction. This distinction becomes blurred as individuals or families maintain prolonged absences. Kathy states that she “moved to the city” as a young child, so she “didn’t know too much in this area” upon her return as an adult. Her lack of attachments in the community reflect her prolonged absence from community life, and her return as a Christian

mission worker only stands to marginalize her even more. Kathy's story, presented more fully in chapter six, really speaks to the complexities of Indian church planting *within* and *against* your own community.

I have only ever observed transplanting at Cornerstone. Cornerstone's sister congregation Earlsboro Indian, in contrast, had no transplant members as of my last visit. The native community in Earlsboro today is largely relegated to one 40-house tribal housing addition, as well as a few dispersed homes in the nearby rural areas. The housing addition is only a recent fixture in the Earlsboro community, whereas the native community in Little Axe has a rich history of maintaining insider/outsider distinctions. The local community context is critical; the *local* of Cornerstone is not the *local* of Earlsboro. Newly planted churches have a keen eye towards the local, so that the issues had by one church are not the same issues had by another.

Cornerstone was founded upon the idea that Indians in Little Axe were involved in "other things," and they needed a decidedly *Indian* place to worship. They "either had to go to church in Norman or had to go to church in Shawnee," explains a mission team member. Another mission member explains, "If we had our own Indian church, maybe the people would come more cause that's their

ownership”⁴⁹. It seems logical that the Indian Baptist mission would appeal to local Little Axe residents on the grounds that it is both a geographically local institution *and* a native institution, but this assumption is problematic for a few reasons.

First, many Shawnees in Little Axe maintain a rich ceremonial cycle of worship. Those regularly attending church in Norman or Shawnee, as the first statement suggests, are likely not active participants in these local ceremonial activities, and thus are not necessarily the mission’s target. The second statement suggests the presence of an Indian mission, by virtue of being both local and a native organization, would incite a level of ownership among the local Shawnee residents. Geographic proximity alone does not qualify as a local institution; Lake Thunderbird is a good example of this. Additionally, Absentee Shawnee locals (and some church members) would argue that an *Indian* Baptist church is not a native institution in the same way that ceremonial dance grounds, the Native American Church, or even tribal casinos are accepted as a local native institution.

The problem of tradition, so to speak, is not a concern for every new Indian church plant. The current pastor of Cornerstone explains:

⁴⁹ The use of pronouns in this single sentence is particularly telling. This mission worker is a transplant, having returned in Little Axe after living elsewhere. The speaker uses “we” to suggest the collective and inclusive nature of the mission effort, but then employs “their” when speaking of the community that ultimately must take ownership (or not) of the church. This single sentence suggests a degree of cultural distance between the speaker and the community to which they have returned.

...like [Central Baptist] in Oklahoma City. They deal with homelessness. They get homeless people come by all the time. Cause they're right there in downtown. Tradition- it's not a big thing for them.... First Indian in Shawnee- Shawnee is a pretty big town, comparatively. They've got a lot of other things that they deal with. For us, I think, because Little Axe is – and for a long time has been- a lot of the traditional types of worship, that's what we deal with.⁵⁰

The church acknowledges and works around the traditional way of life that is prominent in the Little Axe community, perhaps more now than it did in its earlier years. Negotiating the relationship between church life and traditional ways is necessary for churches hoping to engage, supplement, or even replace, that way of life.⁵¹

The Local “In”

The long-term success of a newly planted Indian church rests on connections with a local “in,” or resident community member engaged in community life. Church members suggest that true traction in the target communities occurs once inroads are made with even a single person or a single

⁵⁰ These distinctions between what different Indian churches “deal with” are, in the most general sense, a feature of the urban/rural divide. Another “divide” that figures prominently into the “dealings” of an Indian Baptist church is the East/West divide that is a familiar source of defining highly generalized, but poignantly useful, distinctions about native community life in Oklahoma (see Jackson 2005). Factors contributing to the perceived differences between tribal communities on either the east or west side of I-35, “the dividing line,” include the following: tribal political dissensions and tensions over the historical influence of movements such as AIM, racial tensions, socioeconomic conditions, (in)tolerance of multiple forms of religious worship, and the integration of religious traditions into other facets of everyday life.

⁵¹ Participating in both church life and ceremonial life is not an option within some communities. For example, many “older Creek church” members absolutely do not mix church life with stomp dance activities (see discussion in chapter one). The position on this subject is a bit more ambiguous in the Little Axe community. Even among church members, particularly those active in contemporary Indian Baptist churches, there is a range of opinions about the compatibility of church life with ceremonial life.

family in the community. Examples from Cornerstone Indian and Earlsboro Indian, however, suggest that the local “in” creates more encouragement for church members than it does any real traction in the community.

Mission workers from FIS looked to begin a new Indian work in the community of Earlsboro in 1997, in part because the Indian housing addition provided an optimal target community. Christine McKinney had been living in the Earlsboro Indian housing addition for maybe three years when mission workers from First Indian Baptist of Shawnee first knocked on her door. The FIS mission team asked Christine if she would allow them to conduct a Bible study in her house.⁵² This prospect made Christine “nervous,” as she did not feel “prepared to really surrender my life right then, completely,...to a bunch of Christian people.” She hesitantly agreed to open her house for Bible study.

A building was acquired in Earlsboro and plans to begin the EIBM continued. Christine, who began attending church at FIS following the Bible studies in her house, says of the new mission, “This is my home, my area and maybe this is where I belong.” She eventually “weaned” herself from FIS, her

⁵² Bible studies are one of the first steps taken by a mission team looking to begin a new work in an area. Bible studies are informal gatherings, usually conducted in the home of a local resident, and they provide a good indication of local interest in a new church. Mission teams continue with plans to build a mission if Bible studies (or surveys, in Cornerstone’s case) indicate a reasonable amount of local interest. Bible studies are also opportunities for mission workers to demonstrate their commitment to a prospective community. Bill Yardy told me of one specific Indian work in Perkins that never got off the ground. While there was an expressed local interest in the Bible studies, the mission team did not have the financial resources to continue making the trips from Shawnee to Perkins. Bill Yardy explains that a mission-minded church that does not provide its mission workers with travel funds is “no way to do missions for the Lord.” He adds, “put that in your book.”

home church, and committed herself to the growth of the EIBM.⁵³ Christine is both a charter member of Earlsboro and a local “in.” Christine, along with her children, is the only Earlsboro Indian Housing resident to have joined the mission.

There’s not really any one person at Cornerstone identified as the local “in,” but the nature of being a “local” and an “insider” is historically more complex in a community like Little Axe than in a community like Earlsboro (which because of its rather recent housing addition is a very young community). A local convert joined Cornerstone on the day of its inception. A number of local residents have come and gone from the church over the years. Only a few local Absentee Shawnee “ins” have been at Cornerstone during my time there. Two of these include Frank Little Axe⁵⁴, a sprightly man in his late nineties who helped break ground on the church, and Robert White, a church member who currently serves as outreach leader. Frank and Robert share a pew on the right-hand side of the sanctuary; I also came to share this pew with them, partly because Robert was the only person who I knew when I first visited the church.

⁵³ The use of the term “weaned” against speaks to the kin-based relationships that exist in churches planted according to the Partnering model.

⁵⁴ Frank Little Axe passed on Easter morning, April 16, 2006 at the age of 99. Frank, also known as “Grandpa” or “Chief,” came to know the Lord as an adult, but I never took the opportunity to talk to him about his decision to become a Christian. Frank attended church at Sallateeska Baptist for years until Cornerstone Indian Baptist was built in the community that shares his name. Frank had a Christian funeral at Cornerstone. Cars lined the road into the church, and there was standing room only in the church. It was a true testimony to the impact that Frank had in his community. Frank took great pride in his Shawnee people, and I imagine that he would have been pleased to see so many of his community members in church that day.

Robert tells Frank that I attend the Shawnee language classes. Frank then looks past me, out the window, and back at me and says the Shawnee word for “foggy” to me. These are the only church members with whom I exchange pleasantries in the Shawnee language, usually nothing more than “Hello, how are you?”, “Sit here,” or “See you again.” The other local “in” at church is Beverly Felton and her family. All three of these church members have deep attachments to local ceremonial ground life, though each participates in varying degrees at the dance grounds.

Beverly, according to a member of Cornerstone’s original mission team, is an “example of what our target was out there” because she comes from a “traditional family.” Beverly says that she “never felt the need to go church” because she grew up understanding that her Indian name secured her place in heaven.⁵⁵ Beverly’s extended families have camps at the Shawnee ceremonial dance grounds in Little Axe, and she participates in ceremonial activities

⁵⁵ Traditional Shawnee naming practices involve a name being provided to a child by a designated name-giver. Female children are named nine days after birth, and male children are named ten days after birth. The child becomes a member of the name group that is appropriate to the newly given name. For example, if the given name refers to feathers then it is necessarily of the Turkey name group. If the name refers to water, it is of the Turtle group (Voegelin and Voegelin 1935: 623). The naming ceremony is still in practice today among the Absentee Shawnees. The use of name groups is most prominent today in ceremonial activities. For example, participants at the biannual Bread Dances are still chosen by name group; twelve men and twelve women representing each of the name groups are chosen according to their membership in a specific name group (Voegelin and Voegelin 1935: 630). People are still encouraged to refer to their name group in a variety of settings. For example, a candidate in a recent tribal election referred to his name group as a part of his introduction into the political race. Humorous banter that incorporates a play on someone name group is also common, particularly among older men. Named babies still wear a strand of white beads around their neck. I was told of its meaning, “I don’t know. It just tells me they have their name.” Names are meant to “sound good,” and they provide a level of cohesion among members of the same name group.

throughout the year. Beverly does not believe that her decision to join the church affects her participation at the dance grounds. She explains,

...I had already gotten myself to the point where I wasn't going to spend the night out there anyway. So I always told them, even though I do things on Saturday and Saturday night with our tribal religions, I'm still going to be in church Sunday morning. So we always made it a point to leave the stomp dance by two or three that morning because- I didn't make it that long anyway...

Beverly's statement suggests a compromise, whereby she opts to leave the dance grounds before the end of the stomp dance to make it to church the next morning. Indeed, there has been many a stomp dance on Saturday night at the South Ground that Beverly makes the point of asking me, "Will I be seeing you in church tomorrow?." Most Shawnee people understand stomp dances to be the social component of dance ground activities. Leaving a stomp dance to make it to Sunday church services does not disrupt any type of ceremonial activity, and is therefore more acceptable to ground participants than not fulfilling ceremonial commitments.

Beverly speaks openly to me and in church testimonies about her struggle to be both Christian and Indian. Frank Little Axe taught her, "Its ok to be Indian cause that's how you've grown up and that's who you are. Just as long as you put God first in everything you do." Beverly is an example of a local "in," but she suggests that other native Christians are not that elusive in her community:

And I've noticed too that since I started going to Cornerstone, the more I talk to people, I'm learning that there's more and more Shawnee tribal members that actually go to church now. Not at Cornerstone, but...until you become a Christian and start talking about it, nobody's going to say anything to you...Sometimes my mom would say, "oh yeah. I think they used to go to church in Norman. I think they got saved, so and so"...They just never talked about it and I don't know why.

The local "in" is important for newly planted churches; certainly those discussed here are vital to their home churches. The "in," however, does not guarantee local support for the mission. Frank, Robert and Beverly have each brought family members with them to church (some of whom are practicing Christians elsewhere), but none of their extended families have joined Cornerstone. Navigating the local native community is difficult even for those who are from the community, suggesting that church planting for the local "in" is an ongoing experience of being within and against their own community.

Local interest is optimal, but it seems that committed members from the local target communities are few and far between for new churches. The examples from Cornerstone and Earlsboro show that new church plants are often initiated and grown from efforts outside of the target community. Only after charter members are identified, and the core grows through a process of transplanting, do newly planted churches begin to engage the local community. Indifferent, and even hostile, responses from the community to the church's presence fall in line with the idea that, "Good things are worth waiting for." Despite the stated mission of the Cornerstone to "reach out" and "witness" to the

surrounding Indian population, observations suggest that the church directs a great deal of its efforts outside of the immediate Absentee Shawnee community.

“These are not Indian churches”: Growing the Church Beyond the Target

Cornerstone Indian Baptist Church sponsored a mission trip in June 2006 to the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation in Montana. Located about forty miles south of the Canadian border, the Fort Belknap Reservation is home to both the Assiniboiné and Gros Ventre tribes. I accompanied the church on their first trip to Montana. It was my very first experience on a mission trip. You might say that I had even become a part of what Vine Deloria identifies as the “veritable stream of immigrants [that] heads into Indian country” every summer. Unlike Deloria’s anthropologist who travels to Indian country complete with camera, tape recorder, telescope, hoola hoop and life jacket, the trappings of my “summer migration” to Fort Belknap were quite different.

Namely, along with fifteen church members, I made my trip to Montana with tents, sleeping bags, canned foods, travel sized bottles of shampoo, and a week’s worth of craft supplies and children’s biblical literature. I was not well equipped as an anthropologist; one of the church members even offered her tape recorder to me after watching me furiously scribble notes. I also, unfortunately, was not well equipped to handle the mosquitoes. I was accompanying members of Cornerstone Indian Baptist church from Oklahoma on their mission trip to the

Fort Belknap Reservation. I had hoped to maintain my status as “ethnographic fieldworker” when possible, but learned upon our arrival at the First Baptist Church of Fort Belknap that I was responsible for teaching arts and crafts at Vacation Bible School. I thought to myself, “This is not in my job description!.” It was then that I began to understand the true fallacy of the ethnographic compartmentalization.

Pastor Hicks*⁵⁶, a Cherokee man from Oklahoma, moved to Montana over a decade ago to begin his mission work. After planting a number of Baptist churches in Fort Peck and Rocky Boy reservations, Pastor Hicks planted a Baptist church, the first Baptist church, on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation. In the years that Pastor Hicks has been working on this reservation, the only members of the church at the time of our visit were his immediate family, as well as a couple of individuals that routinely help him around the church grounds. The church is open every Sunday morning for service, but it is not uncommon for the pews to be empty. Despite low attendance and a nearly nonexistent church membership, Pastor Hicks understands that the sought product of mission work, particularly in native communities, does not come without challenge.

The Fort Belknap Baptist Church sits on land that Pastor Hicks describes as “sacred land.” Also occupying this sacred land are sweat lodge structures,

⁵⁶ “Hicks” is a pseudonym.

both active and inactive, and a plains style tipi lodge that pastor has erected.

While we were there, the sweat lodges were being used in preparation for upcoming Sun Dance ceremonies of both the Assiniboine and Gros Ventre. The sweat lodges and the Baptist church operate independently of one another; while Pastor Hicks has accepted the invitation to participate in the sweat lodge ceremonies of his neighbors, it is not usually the case that they, in turn, accept his invitation to the services at the Baptist church. The tipi lodge is not a permanent structure on the grounds; Pastor Hicks, a Cherokee man from Oklahoma, raises the Plains style structure as an attempt to reach out to his northern plains neighbors.



CIBC Mission team members playing soccer while visiting the First Baptist Church of Fort Belknap on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation in Montana in 2006. Notice the tipi frame being constructed in the background. The pastor of this church feels that the presence of the tipi is important for establishing a respectful relationship with local residents.

It is worth noting that the sign in front of Pastor Hicks' church reads "First Baptist Church of Fort Belknap" and not "First Indian Baptist Church of

Fort Belknap,” like so many of the Indian churches in Oklahoma. Pastor Hicks points out to me that the Baptist church in Fort Belknap, as is also the case with native-led Baptist churches “down south” in Oklahoma, is not an “Indian church.” The sweat lodges that surround the church building and the Sun Dance grounds that we visited while there, according to the pastor, are Indian churches. Likewise, he understands the churches that I have been working in Oklahoma to be “Southern Baptist Churches,” not “Indian Churches.”⁵⁷

Cornerstone members returned to Fort Belknap again in 2007. Some church members, however, think that their efforts to witness to Indian people should be kept at home, in their target communities. The following statement from a young church member is a sober reminder that the church’s intended work is local:

...It’s good they want to travel and go to these far off places and help people and stuff. We got our own stuff that can be done like right here...I think it’s crazy that we go all these places, which is good, but how are we going to help someone else if we can’t even help our own people that’s here?

A church’s decision to engage in mission efforts “abroad” suggests a shift from a purely local obligation to one that recognizes the potential benefits of establishing long-term networks outside of the original target community. Extending a church’s mission field to distant communities in greater Indian

⁵⁷ This categorization by the pastor reflects, in part, local forms of conflict towards the Fort Belknap Baptist Church that he has encountered in his mission work. On the other hand, his differentiation between Indian churches and native-led Southern Baptist churches reflects a widely referenced paradox in discussions of Native Christianity.

country presents challenges; mission work abroad is time consuming, financially costly, and demanding on mission personnel and their church families. Perhaps the greatest cost for a church committing to mission work abroad is, as the excerpt above suggests, the effort expended abroad that otherwise would be spent in the local mission field. I know from my own experience in Montana that the church's mission trips are powerful experiences for both the church members and the people who they come to affect on these trips. I have also come to understand that the church's efforts outside of the target community (such as these mission trips) inadvertently enable interaction between the church and the local target community.

Mission trips to Montana require months of fundraising. The church sponsors Indian taco sales and garage sales to fund such trips. Also, individual church members, particularly those employed at tribal offices or tribally owned operations (such as clinics, casinos, gas stations) must ask for vacation days for mission trips.⁵⁸ All of these activities foster interaction between church members and the community and, in turn, provide opportunities for church members to witness to tribal members about the efforts of the church. Donations and resources for mission trips are also provided by sister Indian churches. Members from other Indian Baptist churches participate on the mission trips. A church's

⁵⁸ A church member takes the opportunity on the van ride to Montana to tell me how the tribal offices once discriminated against her because she was a Christian. She explains that tribal employees are granted time off of work for "religious purposes." She said the mission trip was for "religious purposes," but was denied the provision because in her assessment the governor at the time did not think that Christian practices qualified as tribally recognized religious purposes.

willingness to engage in activities outside of their original target community fosters potentially powerful and resourceful connections within a broader network of Indian Baptist churches.

These types of interactions do not generally encourage large numbers of visitors to the church, nor do they necessarily result in public professions of faith. The immediate affect of these activities on the local community appears minimal, but mundane interactions have the potential over time to foster prospective relationships between the church and the community that would not happen otherwise. It is difficult for some church members to understand why the church spends its limited resources to travel to places like Montana, when a need presents itself around the corner. The bottom line is this: if church members cannot get local residents to come down the road to the church, perhaps they can get them to a neutral location to buy an Indian taco. Whether it is an invitation to church or a conversation over Indian tacos, the church finds ways to engage with the community.

“God is on the Move in Little Axe”: Bringing it back to the Local

On February 26, 2006, a man named Al Patneaude offered the message at one of Cornerstone’s Sunday services. Al and his family, who are native but not Shawnee, had been a part of Cornerstone for some time, although they were not from the area. Brother Al was under consideration for ordination, and so he

delivered the Sunday message for several weeks during his “observation period.”

His preaching style was personable. He left the pulpit and walked back and forth down the center aisle. That morning he spoke about the simplicity in being saved, reminding everyone that for “whosoever calls upon the Lord shall be saved.” He emphasized this point: “If you just go to church, you’ll learn what to do. If you just read the Bible, you will learn what God wants you to do.” These points received much approval from the congregation, including calls of “that’s right” and “Amen.”

Brother Al expressed gratefulness to God for placing him and his family in this small Indian church in the “middle of nowhere, Oklahoma.” He said, encouragingly, that God was on the move in Little Axe, Oklahoma. Al moved out of state before I could ask him about this statement. I later emailed him and received six typed pages about what it meant for God to be “on the move in Little Axe.” Here is a brief selection:

...God is on the move converting American Indians to Christianity through churches, i.e., Cornerstone Indian Baptist Church in Little Axe, Oklahoma. It is where American Indians can see the love of God demonstrated. Indians need to see the Great Creator working in a tribal organization in order for them to believe. Cornerstone is a role model tribal organization...

...The place of the local church is to show the more excellent way. God is on the move in Little Axe Oklahoma because the love of God is inherently manifested through the members at Cornerstone Indian Baptist Church. The love demonstrated is not fabricated because the love

of God can't be. I have visited many churches in my lifetime, and Cornerstone is the real deal...

...The vision of Cornerstone Indian Baptist Church is the love of God. This vision is communicated by the pastor and by family (tribal) members whenever they gather together. I believe Cornerstone is being prepared by God to manage a great outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the area. That is why I say God is on the move in Little Axe, Oklahoma.

There are two really interesting components to these comments. First, Al is deliberate in naming Cornerstone as a representative “tribal organization.” He goes on in the full comments to speak about the church as God’s intended vessel for native people to reach their fullest capabilities. This is a powerful statement that validates churches like Cornerstone as native institutions. Second, he stresses the importance of visibility: *demonstrating* the love of God, the love of God being *manifested* in the members’ actions, and the love of God *being evident* when church members gather. The notion of visibility is of central importance to newly planted churches.⁵⁹ Believers understand the importance of *showing* the love of God to nonbelievers. Again, we see how important it is to be seen as a Christian, to be seen having taco sales, to be seen asking for work off, or even to be seen as an outsider.

Church members, even those who occupy seemingly inconsequential positions in the community, are certainly not invisible. Much like the “elephant in the room,” a church member reminds me that the community “knows that we

⁵⁹ Visibility is also a critical component of worship in the context of ceremonial ground practices, in the sense that there are positive cosmological implications for Shawnee people who are seen by the Creator doing the ways that have been given to them.

are here.” Pastor Scott says, “No one expected the church to stay here [this] long. What I tell our people is ‘We need to just keep going’. We may not see a lot of people come in to the church but they see the church, and they see that we’re for real.” The power of visibility is that it transcends the impenetrable cultural boundaries that might otherwise reinforce the distance between church members and the wider community. Church members and community members, who may not speak to one another or worship with one another, still can see the actions of one another.

Finally, Al professes that God is preparing Cornerstone Indian Baptist Church to “manage a great outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the area.” Recall Don Tiger’s earlier statement:

...The people were ready for something. No, they weren’t coming in multitudes, and they weren’t just pouring out of the woodwork and coming. They came one at a time.

Al and Don are not necessarily saying different things here. It is one thing to have an outpouring of people; it is another thing to have an outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

It is never the goal of the church to be authenticated by community acknowledgement. This is more than just a theological position; this is also the church being mindful of their social and cultural position in the community. It is more than enough for church members to know that God himself ordains their efforts. Church members frequently reference the verse from John 15:19, “If you

were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you” (New King James Version). The foundational narratives of Cornerstone’s beginnings, from its meager start as an idea to its development into a “role model tribal organization,” reveals blessings from God.

God is *not* on the move in Little Axe in the sense that the local Indian Baptist church is finding great success in their efforts to affect their target population, the local Absentee Shawnee community. Then again, we must question the arbitrary measures of “success” to which newly planted churches are held. It is the church’s everyday works among the local Shawnee community, however ineffectual they might first appear, that has the potential to propel the church into a broader scope of mission endeavors. Conversely, the church’s participation in the greater Baptist agenda (i.e. the Great Commission) compels them back into the local community regardless of the challenges that this may create.

How do we understand native missions in native communities today as missionary work itself is being executed in new ways, by new people, and under new tensions? Cornerstone’s efforts at conversion both locally and abroad demonstrate well the conflict for studying questions of Native Christianity. Anthropology has spent much effort proclaiming the negative impact of Christian missions in native communities, and some anthropological work has

made the leap to looking at how native communities respond, accommodate, resist and refute the conversion experience. As for my own work, I hope that attention to native missionaries, a highly under treated subject, will provide new opportunities for understanding one aspect of the native-Christian experience as a reflection on the diversity within and between native communities.

Discussion

The position of newly planted Indian Baptist churches is tenuous; on one hand, most new churches are looking to establish locally meaningful roots in their target communities. On the other hand, new churches depend heavily on the contributions of more established Indian churches, as well as the assistance of an extended Baptist network that includes SBC organizations such as the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma and the North American Mission Board. Affiliations within a local target community and those forged within the more extended network of Baptist organizations are not mutually exclusive; it is perfectly reasonable to expect that most churches maintain working relationships in both arenas. It is also reasonable to expect that participation in the extended network of Baptist organizations can destabilize or detract from the church's efforts to fully engage in the life of the local target community. In short, the time and resources necessary to participate in one arena are often spent at the

expense of participation in the other arena. I return to this point more fully in chapters five and six.

The process of church planting ultimately involves a reorientation from existing networks to the establishment of new ones. The growth of a church plant denotes a transition whereby the focus is *less* about nourishing the larger networks of cross-congregational and organizational support and *more* about cultivating a meaningful place for themselves in their chosen community. Establishing an Indian church in a local native community, particularly one that may not even want the church there, requires the church and its congregation to persist with a distinctly local emphasis.

At stake for some church members who opt to continue their work in a culturally exclusive community are claims to membership in some native institutions at the expense of others. Dombrowski (2001) writes about the many ways that native-led Pentecostal churches in Southeast Alaska stand ‘against culture,’ and even embark on attacks of culture. It might be more fitting to say that the efforts of the contemporary native-led Baptist churches in my fieldwork are standing ‘outside culture.’ There are no outward expressions against native culture, *per se*, like the church bonfire that opens Dombrowski’s book. There are, however, very strong feelings against the infiltration of certain native cultural elements into the church or the prioritization of “cultural” things over one’s commitment to the church. Strong feelings, while palpable and sometimes

even effectual in church decisions, rarely produce grand displays of antagonism toward native cultural practices.

At the front of Cornerstone's sanctuary hangs a white flag with a turquoise profile of a man with long hair and a feather hanging from his brow. The silhouette is juxtaposed with a Christian cross. There is a Bible verse listed on the flag. The verse comes from the book of 1 Peter:

Coming to Him as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious, 5 you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. [1 Peter 2:4-5, NKJV]

Those who commit their lives to the planting of new Indian Baptist churches do so under the strong conviction that their efforts to plant the seeds of Christ among their "own people" may not find reward in this life. The interactions central to planting a Christian church in a culturally conservative native community are founded on the possibility that church members will be "rejected by men." In the meantime, church members actively navigate within and against their target communities in anticipation of great things.

The next chapter is an in-depth ethnographic sketch of the Absentee Shawnee community of Little Axe, the target community of the primary church in this research. Cornerstone Indian Baptist Church planted itself in the community of Little Axe, in part, because it identified a perceived need in this community. This need is based on the prevalence of distinctive cultural practices among the Absentee Shawnee in this community, and the discourse of "native

culture” that works to maintain such practices. Twenty years after the church first planted itself in this community, church members are still working out how to situate the church in relation to the highly conservative discourse of “native culture” that has come to stand for Little Axe.

IV. Identifying the Target: Local Communities and the Price of Inclusion

I first came to experience the community of Little Axe on May 29, 2003. It was a hot day and temperatures easily reached 100°F by mid-afternoon. Little Axe is situated on the edge of the Oklahoma Cross Timbers, an area marked by a series of small hills, low-lying grazing fields and pockets of dense post oak and black jack trees. Historical accounts describe the unaccommodating nature of the Cross Timbers region as a “natural obstacle for those making their way into the West” (Cranford and Wyckoff 2009:1). Frank Speck’s accounts of his fieldwork in Oklahoma during 1904-1905 make note of the “worse conditions” of the region known as the Cross Timbers:

This expanse undoubtedly contains much of the richest land of the Southwest. But such roads! Winding now through loamy groves of post oak, then across deep and rocky fords in water that takes the horses to their girths, they finally emerge upon some beautiful but gullied, rutted prairie; such conditions are enough to deter the ranchman from risking his animals and merchandise on roads that lead to a hopeful but uncertain market. [Speck 2009]

Sentiments like this one “persisted until roads and highways of the 19th and 20th century eventually conquered the unyielding woods” (Cranford and Wyckoff 2009:1). The Shawnee bands that eventually came to settle in the Cross Timbers area of Oklahoma had foresight to appreciate the worth of this seemingly inhospitable landscape.

My first day in Little Axe was spent visiting with a Shawnee man in his seventies. This man tells me how he comes from “chief’s blood.” He is directly

descended from Chiefs Little Jim and Big Jim. These two names are central to the story of Shawnee people in central Oklahoma and are discussed at more length later in this chapter. This particular lineage figures prominently in the man's stories and life experiences, but it also situates him within a specific family context in the community. I had only just met this man on this summer day but he who would eventually become a close friend. We sat on metal chairs that rested on the freshly poured cement slab of his new tribal house.⁶⁰

There were three of us sitting there that day visiting and drinking water that could barely keep ice in it. I had offered to drive a visiting scholar from Norway, Leif Selstad, who had conducted fieldwork among the Absentee Shawnee in Little Axe in the late 1970s and early 1980s. He used this day to introduce me to a number of individuals, all of who came to help me in significant ways in the time since that day. Perhaps this scholar knew the difficulties that I would have trying to conduct research in this particularly private community, or maybe he just needed a ride.

I technically began field research in Little Axe five months earlier in January of the same year. I was conducting research for my master's thesis about diabetes with tribal members in the Little Axe area, and so I planted myself in the local tribal health clinic. The clinic is still there today and it is situated

⁶⁰ Absentee Shawnee tribal members, like members of most federally recognized Native American tribes, have access to a variety of tribal programs. One such program is offered by the Absentee Shawnee Housing Authority (<http://www.ashousingauthority.com/index.html>). The Housing Authority assists Shawnee tribal members and other Indian people in the acquisition of new homes, rental assistance, and maintenance support.

directly off of Highway 9 between the tribally owned gas store and Thunderbird Casino, perhaps the community's two most easily recognizable structural landmarks viewable from the highway. The clinic itself proved to be a sterile and limiting site for understanding the lived experiences of people managing diabetes. If anything, my position in the clinic allowed me to see how people used their clinic visits to momentarily put their "lived experiences" on hold. It was not until that hot day in May 2003, five months after back and forth trips to the Little Axe clinic, that I first began to really experience the community of Little Axe.

We were three unlikely acquaintances visiting on the cement slab that day: a Norwegian anthropologist, a graduate student from Alabama, and the direct descendent of Chief Little Jim of the Big Jim Band of Shawnees. Selstad graciously lent me a copy of his notes from this particular visit and these notes reveal something of our conversation with the elder man that I, as a novice fieldworker, would not appreciate until much later. He describes the man's willingness to help me, and his apparent eagerness to show me the ceremonial grounds as "really forthcoming" (Selstad, personal notes, May 29, 2003).

Before I left the house that evening, the elder Shawnee man invited me to his church. I thought the church might be a good place to meet local people; I could only remember that the church's name had something to do with "rock" or "stone." I think that he was genuinely surprised to see me show up to

Cornerstone Indian Baptist Church one morning. It was not until much later in my work that I began to understand why his seemingly polite gesture of showing me around his family's land was so "forthcoming," why his openness to an outsider was noteworthy to a more seasoned anthropologist, and how his membership at the Baptist church fit into the bigger picture.

This was my first genuine visit to the wooded lowlands of Little Axe, and yet it did not take long to understand even the most meager value of the dense post oak forests around us. The trees seem to create a canopy over the community, making it difficult for anyone outside of the perimeters to know what is happening underneath. So it was that the heat of the day was manageable under the umbrella of post oaks. The idea that the trees serve to envelop the community is useful in as much as it speaks to the private nature of much of this community. Little Axe is composed of an amalgam of distinct groups whose collective dynamic informs the character of the community today. The collective dynamic of the community is important, particularly as it speaks to changing race relations and tensions erupting out of land disputes, unwarranted development and competition over local resources. Despite these multiple histories in Little Axe, it is largely through the experiences of the local Absentee Shawnee people that I have come to know and will present the following sketch of Little Axe and its people.

The first aim of this chapter is to look at key historical moments that led to a Shawnee settlement in present day Oklahoma, and more specifically, the emergence of an Absentee Shawnee community in Little Axe, Oklahoma. The community of Little Axe is the primary site for this research because it is where Cornerstone Indian Baptist Church chose to plant itself. Church planters did not choose to plant a church in Little Axe according to local invitation or geographical preference; rather, the planters chose Little Axe because it is home to a significant Absentee Shawnee population whom church planters took to represent a community in need. The Absentee Shawnee in Little Axe are the target community for this mission-minded church and so an understanding of this church plant must begin with an understanding of its target.

The perception of Absentee Shawnee people as highly culturally conservative, clinging tightly to a way of life that seemingly stands against Christianity, contributes to the idea that Little Axe is ripe for the winning of new souls to Christ. Adherence to traditional activities as an indicator of lost souls is problematic; the charge of cultural conservatism does not neatly equate to “lost” souls. A more worthwhile approach is to consider how cultural conservatism, as a somewhat nebulous characterization of a community, is rooted in distinct cultural practices that are firmly insulated according to very real social, cultural and geographic measures.

The second aim of this chapter is to explore the historical and cultural basis for the notion of cultural conservatism so often applied to the Absentee Shawnee (particularly those living in Little Axe), and to consider how this concept creates distinct social and discursive boundaries around which the transplanted Indian church must negotiate. I consider how certain native cultural institutions, such as ceremonial ground life, (and not others) act as locally sanctioned sites of cultural production. The institutions discussed in this chapter, particularly those related to Shawnee ceremonialism, act as sites of cultural production in the literal sense that they are the physical sites for the performance of Shawnee cultural practices. Additionally, these sites reproduce a set of social positions and relations that are based on rules of inclusion and exclusion; these rules of engagement, so to speak, come to stand for the Shawnee conservatism that the church and so many of its members seem to stand against. The goal of this chapter is not to describe Shawnee cultural institutions, but instead to understand how these institutions provide both physical and discursive spaces from which the church and its members negotiate their presence.

James Howard's *Shawnee!* is an ethnographically detailed account of Shawnee ceremonialism, a subject matter he sees as a particularly "rich field" because this "tribe is one of the most conservative in North America" (1981: xiii). Howard's approach to "assemble as much cultural data regarding the Shawnees as possible" so that their culture "will attain the prominence it

deserves” (1981: xiii) produced the most extensive published source of ethnographic data on Shawnee cultural institutions in the late twentieth century. I hope to distinguish my own ethnographic approach from Howard’s without denigrating the general value of his work. Despite what can now be recognized as some errors of fact and interpretation, Howard’s work is certainly useful to myself and continues to be of interest for some Shawnee people.

My approach throughout the research process, particularly as it relates to the assembly of a final ethnographic product, takes its lead from the preference for cultural privacy that is valued in the Little Axe community. The focus of this research is church planting in native communities, and so the presentation of intimate details of ceremonial life would be superfluous. This chapter explores the historical background of the community and the nature of cultural privacy found here, and does not parcel out the details of Shawnee cultural practices, as I was privy to them.

My choice of ethnographic presentation in this chapter follows the trend identified by Pauline Turner Strong whereby ethnographic research in Native North America goes beyond the tendency to simply describe some aspect of Native American culture, and instead offers “innovative case studies of social processes...that reflect both Native realities and scholarly preoccupations” (2005:254). Similarly, I appreciate Dombrowski’s efforts to produce an “ethnography of a problem” and not “of a people,” to see how “the

stuff of culture (the ceremonies, customs, relations, and patterns of ideas) comes to be caught up with, and become part of, the political and social changes people [face]" (2001:4). This ethnographic sketch does not gauge the cultural resilience of the Absentee Shawnee from the time of Howard's book; such attempts say little about how communities work out the "stuff of culture." Instead, I explore the processes whereby this community comes to define its own rules of inclusion and exclusion on the basis of culture. It is the rules of cultural privacy and not the private stuff of culture that ultimately condition the relationship between the Indian Baptist church and this target community.

Historical Background

The Absentee Shawnee, together with the Loyal (Cherokee) Shawnee and the Eastern Shawnee, comprise the three federally recognized Shawnee tribes that exist today. These separate tribes comprise the larger Shawnee Nation, a consortium of Algonquian-speaking groups that have historically maintained many separate communities across diverse geographic areas. The Shawnee language, part of the Central Algonquian subgroup of the Proto-Algonquian parent language, is a member of the Algic Language Family (Mithun 1999: 326-7; see also Goddard 1974).⁶¹ The Shawnee language is most

⁶¹ For additional resources on Shawnee language see Andrews 1994, 2002; Boling 1980; Costa 2001; Gatschet 1877, 1878-93; Goddard 1967, 1974; Hickerson 1957; Kinietz and Voegelin, eds. 1939; Miller 1959; Norcross 1993; Parks 1975; Pilling 1891; Schutz 1975; Voegelin, C.F. 1936, 1938-40; and C.F. Voegelin and E.W. Voegelin 1935, 1946.

closely related to the Fox-Sauk-Kickapoo languages (Mithun 1999: 333).

Shawnee speakers comment on the similarities between their spoken language and those of other Algonquian-speaking groups, particularly their Kickapoo relatives.⁶² One Shawnee speaker explains to me that the Kickapoo language is easy to understand except that Kickapoo is “fancier” than Shawnee. Variations in speaking styles among contemporary Shawnee speakers in Little Axe tend to follow in line with specific family backgrounds and residential patterns, but are often the result of some type of Kickapoo affiliation.⁶³

Scholarly work generally placed the Shawnee within the northern Woodland cultural tradition according to linguistic and cultural features (Trigger 1978). Clark Wissler situates the Shawnee in the Central Algonquian Division of the larger Woodland classification, but does so on the basis of no ethnographic data and says that the Shawnee “seem to belong with the transitional tribes of

⁶² Shawnees in Little Axe maintain close ties with their Kickapoo relatives in Oklahoma. The Kickapoo and the Shawnee are intricately linked according to intertribal kin relations, and these relations are maintained and renewed according to mutual participation in tribal ceremonies such as the Shawnee War Dance and Kickapoo adoption rites. Shawnees also maintain a degree of affiliation with Mexican Kickapoo, although I cannot offer anything other than a few anecdotal stories about this relationship. As it relates to mutually decipherable languages, a woman of Shawnee and Oklahoma Kickapoo affiliation tells me that she was able to understand the Mexican Kickapoo at the time of her last visit to them. This visit was probably over thirty-five years ago but she explained her familiarity with their language according to her own level of fluency in both Shawnee and Kickapoo.

⁶³ Even slight variations in speaking style among fluent Shawnee speakers, such as the difference between *petefilo* and *petchfilo* ([you] come in), are often explained according to the speakers’ residential proximity to the Kickapoo language or genealogical ties to Kickapoo families. Attempts to account for differences in pronunciation among fluent Shawnee speakers suggests distinct ideologies about the relationship between language and Shawnee identity. Variations in Shawnee speech patterns according to Kickapoo influence do not challenge the conservatism of Shawnee speakers in the same way that a second-language learning pattern might. The Kickapoo maintain an even greater reputation of cultural conservatism than do the Absentee Shawnee, so that Kickapoo influence is perhaps less threatening to the Shawnee’s conservatism than other outside influences. Variations associated with Kickapoo ties may even act as cultural capital, in the sense that affiliations with Kickapoo conservatism act to further affirm the conservatism of the Absentee Shawnee.

the eastern group, if not actually to the Southeastern area” (1914: 460). A fixed northern Woodland classification for the Shawnee is problematic, as Wissler suggests, because the Shawnee historically share cultural features and socio-political alliances with native neighbors from the Southeastern region, especially the Creek, Cherokee and Yuchi (Warren 2005: 74; see also Howard 1981; Jackson 2003a; Jackson and Linn 2000; Schutz 1975; Swanton 1922).

The historically transitional nature of the entire Woodlands region produced “intense cultural interactions” among diverse tribal communities in this vast area (Keeling 1992: 25; see also Jackson 2003b; Kroeber 1939; Trigger 1978). Native Woodland communities in Oklahoma today share similar traditions and histories of interactions that are rooted in their homelands of the southeastern and northeastern Woodland regions (Jackson 2005: 173).⁶⁴ Such historical interactions fit neatly within a growing trend in Native American ethnography to offer more sophisticated treatments of cultural interactions between native communities in specific geographic areas (Jackson and Levine 2002). This trend is a much-needed addition to older approaches in Native American ethnography, such as the culture area approach, that fixed cultural

⁶⁴ Jackson identifies the following peoples in Oklahoma as Woodland communities: the Caddos, Cherokees, Chickasaw, Choctaws, Creeks, Delawares, Miamis, Natchez, Ottawas, Peorias, Quapaws, Seminoles, Seneca- Cayugas, Shawnees, Wyandottes, and Yuchis. He distinguishes the Woodland communities of the Citizen Potawatomie, Kickapoos, Sac and Fox, and Iowas from the others on the basis that they do not maintain their own stomp dance tradition, a cultural tradition marked in some form by the former groups (Jackson 2005: 173-174).

traditions to specific geographic regions in overly simplistic ways (Jackson and Fogelson 2004).

The culture area approach, an approach promulgated in the early Americanist tradition by Boas and extended in the work of Clark Wissler and Alfred Kroeber (and others), is a classification device that differentiates tribal entities by geographic regions and complex cultural traits. The strength of the culture area approach is that it “acknowledged the adaptive value of local cultures” that, in turn, “undermined nineteenth-century social evolutionary theories that viewed all peoples as located somewhere on a path of movement through a fixed and universal progression of developmental stages” (Jackson and Fogelson 2004: 2). This approach is generally problematic because it encapsulates tribal communities into bounded groups on the basis of static cultural trait lists and often arbitrary geographic boundaries, and yet the culture area approach encouraged researchers to consider how the histories of particular groups adapted to local environments, and negotiated social links with neighboring peoples (Jackson and Fogelson 2004: 2).

The Shawnee, perhaps more than most Northeastern Woodland tribal groups, have a history of geographically dispersed settlements and frequent migration. The culture area approach cannot definitively classify the Shawnee into a single geographic or culture area, in part, because this approach lacks “sensitivity to changes in time and [is] hampered by the fuzziness of areal

boundaries” (Jackson 2003a:15).⁶⁵ The Shawnee example highlights the limitations of the culture area approach, and speaks to the need for more sophisticated treatments of the diversity within and between Shawnee and other communities.

Historian Stephen Warren reports, “Between the sixteenth century and the late nineteenth century, the Shawnees occupied more than two hundred villages stretching from Maryland to Mexico” (2005: 6). The expanse of native groups identified as Shawnee became, as Warren says, “largely divorced from sacred places and tribal members learned how to recreate their identity as part of a transient culture” (2005: 6). The transient nature of Shawnee historical life is central to an understanding of contemporary Shawnee community life in Oklahoma, particularly as residents of the Little Axe community restore the role of sacred places in Shawnee history and culture. This chapter provides background necessary for understanding the work of using place, and the boundaries that define places, as a mechanism for sustaining cultural autonomy.

Migration, Displacement and the Role of Cultural Autonomy

Accounts of early Shawnee history focus largely on their complex involvement in political alliances and warfare on the colonial frontier,

⁶⁵ The emphasis on culture areas in the Americanist tradition initiated by Franz Boas, but later made popular by the writings of Clark Wissler (1917), Ruth Benedict, Alfred Kroeber and Edward Sapir. See Herskovits (1930) for an early, but rather astute, criticism of the culture area approach and its use by Wissler in particular.

biographical sketches of central figures in Shawnee history, the politics of land, and frequent migrations (see Alford 1936; Callender 1978; Griffin 1937; Howard 1981; Nettl 1953; Noe 2001; Spencer 1909; E.W. Voegelin 1944; Witthoft and Hunter 1955). The earliest known whereabouts of the Shawnee remains a matter of dispute, with the early historical period being a regular subject of scholarly debate. It is now generally accepted that a variety of historical placements are likely with a group whose existence is heavily marked by “tribal fission and nomadic subsistence” (Noe 2001: xx; see also Callender 1978: 622). A less sensational perspective suggests that a variety of historical and cultural trajectories, and not simply political dissonance, is responsible for the diverse and geographically dispersed Shawnee communities that existed both historically and today.⁶⁶

Early movements of the Shawnee are well-documented elsewhere and so for immediate purposes it is sufficient to characterize historical Shawnee life as highly transitory. Recall Warren’s claim that Shawnee people in the early colonial period produced a culture “largely divorced from sacred places and tribal members learned how to recreate their identity as part of a transient culture” (2005:6). During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, the power of place quickly takes precedence for those Shawnees looking to use

⁶⁶ Warren challenges “the long-accepted paradigm that Central Algonquians derive from politically unified tribes,” suggesting instead that ‘being Shawnee’ “depended less on political allegiance and more on language, gender, and the cultural practices that affirmed these cultural beliefs” (2005: 8-9).

land as a means for sustaining cultural privacy and autonomy. The periods around the American Civil War are most pertinent to an understanding of the present-day Absentee Shawnee in Oklahoma, but a brief look at internal factions leading up to this point are useful.

Historical Formations

At the time of the French and Indian War and the American Revolution the Shawnee were composed of many different political factions. Each faction maintained differing levels of participation in ongoing battles with the French, the British, the Americans, and other Indian tribes. Between 1774 and 1780, for example, a number of Shawnees opting out of participation in the American Revolution began to move west of the Mississippi River into Missouri (Noe 2001: xxii, see also Howard 1981: 15). Many of the political factions that emerged in response to ongoing battles formed in line with existing hereditary divisions within the Shawnee tribe.

As described by early 20th century ethnography and ethnohistory (Alford 1936; Kinietz, V. and E. Voegelin 1939; C.F. Voegelin 1936; Voegelin, C.F. and E.W. Voegelin 1935; Voegelin, E.W. and Georg Neumann 1948), the Shawnee Nation is made up of five divisions including: Pekowi (PekowiiΘa), Kispoko (KišpokoΘa), Thawegila (Θawegila), Chillicothes (ChalakaaΘa), and Mekoge

(Mekoče).⁶⁷ Early nineteenth century manuscripts describe the five Shawnee divisions as

...more or less autonomous political units, each division having its own chief and oftentimes its own affiliations with other tribes, as well as a culture which, in certain minor aspects, differed from that of any of the other divisions. In the extensive wanderings of the Shawnee, the tribe rarely moved as a whole, but rather as divisions, or combinations of two or more divisions, or in small bands drawn from the divisions. [Kinietz and Ermine Voegelin, eds. 1939: xiii]

In the Shawnee traditional clan structure, each of these divisions has historically been responsible for specific matters, or duties, in the tribe.⁶⁸

The faction of Shawnees that chose not to confront American aggression during the Revolution consisted of mostly the Thawegila, Pekowi, and Kispoko divisions, and they established themselves in Cape Girardeau, Missouri around 1793. Known as “the peace faction,” this group “took no part in the war of 1794 nor in that of 1812 nor has this portion of the Shawnees ever been engaged against the Americans since the decisive battle of Point Pleasant” in 1774 (Alford 1936: 201). Other Shawnees, primarily of the Chillicothes and Mekoge divisions, opted to fight as allies to the British during the Revolution and they

⁶⁷ Spellings vary between texts. The following spellings are also found in the texts: Piqua, Pekowith, PekowiiOa, Pickaways, Pec-ku-we; Kišpoko, Kīšhpookoo, Kis- pu- go, Kishpokogi; Thawegila, Ōawiikila; Mekotshe, Maakoatshaa, Mak-ku-jay (also called Shpito or Shpitotha); Tshilikauthee, Calaka, Chillicothe, ja li ki fe, Cha-law-kaw-Tha.

⁶⁸ These duties are as follows: The Pekowi division “had charge of the maintenance of order and looked after the celebration of things pertaining to religion or faith,” the Kispoko division had “charge of matters pertaining to war and the preparation and training of warriors,” the Mekoče division “had charge of things relating to health and medicine and good for the whole tribe,” and finally, the Thawegila and ChalakaaOa were the powerful divisions and had charge of political matters (Alford 1936: 44).

remained in the Ohio area. These Shawnee became known as the Ohio Shawnees (Howard 1981: 15).

The divergent Shawnee responses to eighteenth century wars described above established an enduring separation between those who migrated westward, known as the Western Shawnee, and those that remained in the Ohio area. This separation effectively “reorganized the relationship between the five Shawnee descent groups, and had presided over a schism in the Shawnee nation whose legacy is palpable to this day” (Warren 2005: 70).⁶⁹ The Pekowi, Kispoko, and Thawegila divisions that migrated westward to avoid American aggression are the divisions from which the Absentee Shawnee come, and the ongoing migrations of these divisions are central to an understanding of presence of Absentee Shawnee in Oklahoma today.

The Shawnees that settled in Missouri in 1793 also eventually factionalized. In 1822, a portion of the Shawnees in Missouri migrated to present-day Texas where they remained until 1839 (Noe 2001: xxiv). This Shawnee faction migrated into present-day Texas with Delaware, Creek, and Cherokee bands. These groups hoped to secure a land base in Texas, but were expelled from Texas after a battle ensued and they were defeated by the “notorious Indian hater” Mirabeau Lamar (Howard 1981: 20). Upon leaving

⁶⁹ It is difficult to ascertain the influence of these divisions in the tribe now. Such divisions are mentioned primarily in regard to ceremonial occasions and honorific social roles. For example, the Kispoko are responsible for matters pertaining to war and those hereditarily linked to this division continue to be responsible for the annual War Dance.

Texas, this group of Shawnees moved north and settled along the Canadian River in Indian Territory. This faction of Shawnees would later become known as the Absentee Shawnees (Noe 2001: xxiv).

Meanwhile, the Shawnees who remained in Missouri had given up their land claims in the 1825 Treaty and moved to a reservation assigned to them in Kansas.⁷⁰ At this point, there are substantial groupings of Shawnee in Kansas, Indian Territory and Ohio. Shortly after the passage of the Indian Removal Act of 1830, the Ohio Shawnee signed the Treaty of Wapakoneta in 1831 and began their transition to the Kansas reserve.

In 1854, the Shawnees living in Kansas ceded their 1,600,000-acre reserve in exchange for individual allotted tracts and surplus land in present day Oklahoma, known then as Indian Territory (Noe 2001: xxv). Provisions were made to ensure that some of this allotted land in Indian Territory was reserved for those who were absent from the Kansas Reservation, specifically members of the Big Jim Band of Shawnees who had been living along the Canadian River in Indian Territory since their expulsion from Texas in 1839. The Big Jim Band of Shawnees thus acquired the name “Absentees,” a name that speaks to their deliberate absence from imposed reservation life.

As the Civil War approached the Absentee Shawnees living in Indian Territory fled to Kansas to escape harassment and pressures from the

⁷⁰ Treaty with the Shawnee, 1825. Nov. 7, 1825. 7 Stat., 284. Proclamation, Dec. 30, 1825.

Confederate army. Meanwhile, the Potawatomie Tribe living on a reservation in Kansas had also exchanged their land in Kansas for a reservation in Indian Territory. The U.S. federal government gave the Potawatomie a reservation along the Canadian River, including some of the same land that the Absentee Shawnees had inhabited upon their expulsion from Texas. At this time, in 1867, the Absentee Shawnee now in Kansas had also formed an agreement with the federal government. The Treaty of 1867 includes the following condition:

Whereas a certain portion of the Shawnees, who had rights to lands reserved to them for a limited period by the treaty of November 2nd, 1854, have heretofore, for various reasons, been unable to enter into the enjoyments of those rights, but now desire to avail themselves of such rights in order to secure a permanent home. [Agreement with the Shawnee Tribe of Indians 1867].

The Treaty of 1867 between the Absentee Shawnees and the federal government, however, was never ratified. Therefore, there was no “official” record of any Shawnees living or having right to land along the Canadian River. The Shawnees returned from Kansas to their previous homes along the Canadian River in Indian Territory only to find that the federal government had already granted this land to the Potawatomie, known now as the Citizen Band Potawatomie Tribe of Oklahoma. The Shawnee, who once lived in the area and had now returned, were granted permission to stay on select tracts of the Potawatomie reservation.

Allotment: Land and Refusal

The Shawnee and Potawatomie both received individual allotments in the area along the Canadian River as a result of the Dawes or General Allotment Act of 1887. The reservation of the Potawatomie, including the land along the Canadian River on which many Absentees had resided for years, was ceded to the government in an Act passed in 1891 (see Act of March 3, 1891, ch. 543, 26 Stat. 989, 1016-22). The Act states that the Potawatomie Tribe must "hereby cede, relinquish, and forever and absolutely surrender to the United States all their claim, title and interest of every kind and character in and to" the land on which the Potawatomie and the Shawnees were living (Id. § 8, Art. I, at 1016). The Act of 1891 describes the presence of Shawnees on the former Potawatomie reservation in the following way:

As to the Absentee Shawnees, it seems that some time about 1840 they left the main band then located upon the Shawnee Reservation in Kansas, and after roaming and hunting for some time settled down upon some of the country embraced within the limits of [the Potawatomi] reservation, where they have remained ever since. They were not there by any treaty or Executive order, but the Government has long known of their presence there.

The unofficial presence of Shawnees on the former Potawatomie Reservation is likened to the "nature of squatters" (Def. Br. p9). The Absentees "possessory right was in the nature of a tenancy at will" and their possession of the land reportedly occurred "only because the Citizen Band expressed a willingness not to disturb them provided the Government extended the Citizen Band's

reservation to include an equivalent area westward” (Finding 8, *The Citizen Band of Potawatomi Indians of Okla. v. United States*, 6 I.C.C. 646, 663-65, September 18, 1958). Tensions over land disputes between the Absentees and the Potawatomie intensified following the relinquishment of the Potawatomie Reservation in 1891. The bulk of these tensions are the result of the challenges to compensation that came from the unofficial presence of Absentee Shawnee individuals occupying shared reservation lands granted by executive order to the Potawatomi.

Land disputes and court battles between the Absentee and the Citizen Band Potawatomie continue to present day. While the historically embattled relationship between the Absentees and the Citizen Band Potawatomi is based largely in the politics of land, tensions between the two tribal nations continue to manifest according to various points of distinction that are covered more fully later in this chapter.

The allotment period contributed to a great deal of internal differences among the Absentee Shawnees living in Indian Territory. The land allotments resulting from the Dawes or General Allotment Act of 1887 accelerated a central schism between what would become known as the “conservative” and the “progressive” factions of the Absentee Shawnee (Alford 1936; Howard 1981). Those opposed to the issuance of allotments were the conservative band of Absentees led by Big Jim. The conservative Big Jim Band, together with their

Kickapoo relatives, again moved south to Old Mexico in 1900 to evade placement onto land allotments in present day Oklahoma and to secure a land base away from government oversight.⁷¹ This is the second major effort by Absentee Shawnee bands to secure a land base in Old Mexico. Upon their arrival in Mexico, the Big Jim band was fatally hit with small pox. Big Jim and those who accompanied him to Mexico, excepting only two, perished before they could return to their families who were still in Oklahoma (Noe 2001: xxv). Thomas Wildcat Alford, an Absentee Shawnee man born in 1860, wrote a story of his people called *Civilization and the story of the Absentee Shawnee* (1936). Alford writes of Big Jim's death, "Thus ended the career of a chief, who except for his fight against civilization was a noble character" (Alford 1936: 175).⁷²

The remaining Big Jim Band of Absentee Shawnee, led by Big Jim's son Little Jim, finally settled in central Oklahoma after a series of failed attempts to secure a land base in Mexico away from U.S. Government influence. The settlement of the Big Jim Band along the Little River in central Oklahoma did not stop their attempts to evade federal pressures. Chief Little Jim, following in

⁷¹ Shawnee and Kickapoo histories of migration and settlement are distinct; while there were mutual efforts by the Kickapoo and the Shawnee to settle in Old Mexico, only the Kickapoo are known to have maintained any substantial residential population in the area. There continue to be, however, ongoing visitation between Mexican Kickapoo and their Oklahoma relatives (both Shawnee and Kickapoo).

⁷² Family stories in Little Axe recount the ongoing significance of Big Jim's efforts to establish a Shawnee settlement in Old Mexico. Big Jim's son, Little Jim, also made trips to Old Mexico; he was also unsuccessful in obtaining a desirable land base in that region.

line with his father's efforts, also sought a land base in Old Mexico. He, too, was unsuccessful.

The eventual willingness to settle in the knotty post oak woods along the Little River proved to be a strategy of sorts for securing the cultural and political autonomy that the Shawnee had long sought. Absentee Shawnee tribal member Clifton Blanchard, in an oral history interview in 1968, explains:

*[Big Jim] told the government that he been pushed enough so if they would give him and his people the worst land in Oklahoma, then no white man would want it anymore. So here we are on sand hills, red dirt, and still they put in that Thunderbird Lake and take our land. [Doris Duke Indian Oral History Collection 1968: M-6]*⁷³

The sand hills and red dirt valleys became the geographic base for the community of Little Axe. This landscape is not the foundation of this historically transient community. Rather, the foundation of the Little Axe community is grounded in the families that first settled the area and whose relatives continue to live there today.

The Absentee Shawnees officially reorganized under the Oklahoma Indian Welfare Act of 1936, and created a constitution that was ratified in 1938. The Absentee Shawnee Tribe currently has approximately 3,000 enrolled tribal

⁷³ The notes from this interview say that the interviewee did not allow the use of a tape recorder. The refusal to allow tape recorders is not uncommon in this community, particularly as it relates to ceremonial practices. I knew Clifton Blanchard as a much older man than did either this interviewer or James Howard, who also cites Clifton Blanchard in his book *Shawnee!*. In October 2005 I took Mr. Blanchard a Xerox copy of this 1968 interview and he clearly remembered (and thought it a bit humorous) that he had not allowed the interviewer to use a recorder. Others in the room commented that Mr. Blanchard's strict tendencies made him "a hard one," a characterization that also made him laugh.

members.⁷⁴ The majority of Absentee Shawnee people live today in and around Pottawatomie County, OK, including the municipalities of Norman, Tecumseh, Shawnee, and in communities like Little Axe. Today, traveling to and from Pottawatomie County, OK, the area is marked with signs that read “Entering Citizen Potawatomie Nation” and “Leaving Citizen Potawatomie Nation.” These signs, and the boundaries that they affirm, evoke the embattled efforts of the Absentees to historically secure their own parcel of land beyond federal and tribal interference.

Historical Trajectories and Contemporary Tensions

The background offered thus far suggests that the reputation for cultural conservatism among contemporary Absentee Shawnee is embedded in their history as a people with an intense commitment to practice and protect a way of life amidst rapid change. Native communities across the state of Oklahoma continue to deal with the fracturing effects of government policies from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Shawnees who settled in the Cross Timbers of Little Axe did so to establish a land base away from the outside encroachment and government oversight, so that they may retain an autonomous way of life that so many of their native neighbors were already losing.

⁷⁴ As of December 31, 2003, the AST tribally enrolled members numbered 3004 (The Absentee Shawnee News Jan. 2004).

Outside encroachment, particularly in the forms of economic development and municipal expansion, continues at an accelerated pace and requires the Shawnees in Little Axe to confront their own significance in a space that is no longer just their own. “Local white development,” according to Selstad, “did not favor the Indian community in Little Axe” (1986: 18). Contemporary conversations, however, suggest that encroachment by “outsiders,” a group distinct from just “white people,” continues to affect the landscape of the community. The next section considers the contemporary significance of land in the Little Axe community, and how it figures into the work of maintaining cultural boundaries. The following discussion of Lake Thunderbird is central to an understanding of the contemporary role of land, and how this figures into the physical placement of the Indian Baptist church that now sits on former Indian trust land in the middle of the Little Axe community.

75

The Costs of Encroachment: The Story of Lake Thunderbird

On June 27, 1960, Congress authorized plans for the construction of the Norman Dam. The dam, located at the confluence of Hog Creek and Little River, created a 6,070-acre reservoir now known as Lake Thunderbird. The

⁷⁵ According to the National Congress of the American Indian, the nature of tribal trust land is such that the “title to tribal lands is held by the federal government in a trust status for the benefit of current and future generations of tribal members. Most often this land is within the boundaries of a reservation. Trust status means that the land falls under tribal government authority and is generally not subject to state laws. Trust status also creates limitations on the use of the land and requires federal approval for most actions” (<https://www.ncai.org/Land-Into-Trust.57.0.html>, accessed July 1, 2010).

Bureau of Reclamation expropriated approximately five square miles of tribal trust land, nearly one-fourth of the trust land in the Little Axe area, for the project's construction (Selstad 1986: 17). Today the reservoir is surrounded by eighty-six miles of shoreline and is part of the Lake Thunderbird State Park. The State Park's recreational facilities attract thousands of annual visitors to the small community of Little Axe.

The single most common theme in stories about the lake, as told by Shawnee people today, is the alarming rate at which Indian trust land was misappropriated for the construction of the lake. By 1962, four months into the construction of the dam, nearly fifty percent of the required Indian trust land had been acquired by "negotiations with the Indian owners and with final approval from the Indian Service."⁷⁶

A letter written in 1962 by a man named Henry Brendle sheds interesting light on the land "negotiations" that took place between the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Indian landholders. The Brendle family, though non-Indian, is well remembered among many Indian families in the community, in part because they once ran a school in the Little Axe area. Henry Brendle's letter inquired about the purchasing of Indian land for the Norman Dam. He wrote,

I am writing you in behalf of the Shawnee Indians who own land in this reservoir. These Indians property has been taken for 1/4th of what the value is on it... I wish somebody who has enough influence to see that

⁷⁶ Robert Kerr Collection, Carl Albert Congressional Research and Studies Center Congressional Archives, University of Oklahoma.

*these Indians are paid the value of their land so that...they may have a home to live in as they certainly cannot replace the land for the money that they are getting....*⁷⁷

Mr. Brendle's letter received this response from the Bureau of Reclamation:

*... the individual Indian cannot sell, transfer, or otherwise dispose of his land without the consent of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. In this manner the Indian is protected and assured a fair and equitable price for his land...the Indian owner has the same recourse afforded any other landowner in the event he feels our offer is not sufficient...*⁷⁸

I did not speak to any native residents who felt their land was paid for with a “fair and equitable price” as the Bureau of Reclamation documents contend; indeed, the strong perception is that individual Indian land holders were paid significantly less for their land than their non-Indian neighbors. In line with this perception is also the idea that Indian land was targeted for the project because it would be easier to appropriate than non-trust (non-Indian) land. A Shawnee man explains the low payment his family received for their land by saying, “Well, cause we was Indians! That’s what [they] wanted to do was get all the Indians out.”

The installation of the lake undoubtedly affected the lives of both Indian and non-Indian families living along the Little River; the historical record is replete with personal accounts and written petitions against the lake by non-Indian families. Despite mutual loss, the experiences of land loss had by non-

⁷⁷ Robert Kerr Collection, Carl Albert Congressional Research and Studies Center Congressional Archives, University of Oklahoma.

⁷⁸ Robert Kerr Collection, Carl Albert Congressional Research and Studies Center Congressional Archives, University of Oklahoma.

Indian and Indian families are distinctive from each other in important ways. For one thing, the Shawnee's experiences of losing land to the lake are not strongly articulated in the historical record. The Shawnees did not stage public protests or employ popular media to support their cause. A local newspaper observes in 1962, "[The Shawnee] do not even desire to protest... They will accept this as their people have accepted uprootings in the past" (O'Bear, March 25, 1962).⁷⁹ The lack of public protests by Shawnees had less to do with a lack of concern over the lake than with other things.

Many Shawnees did not have, contrary to the Bureau's claim, the "same recourse afforded any other landowner." Language barriers and lack of formal representation made it difficult for many Shawnee people to read information about the lake or to follow the details of land negotiations. The community had resigned itself in many ways to the idea that there was little that they could do to keep the lake from coming. According to one Shawnee man whose house had been physically moved while he was at school, "I think they did try to fight it but you know, it was trusted land and there wasn't too much they could do about it. The government already owned it anyway." Repeatedly, the man says throughout his story, "I just don't think we ever had a choice."

⁷⁹ Community members did sign a letter petitioning against the lake because they were told that such a letter would ensure the building of the lake away from Indian land. As one tribal member tells me, "I don't know what year- it was in '60 or '61, but we knew that it was over. They were going to go ahead and build no matter what else happened."

Strong feelings of unease among some Shawnee families are also directly related to the fact that the lake is built over a number of Shawnee grave sites. According to a history of the Norman Dam written on April 17, 1963, eight Native American grave sites were located during concrete placements (Simond 1999). A Shawnee man who worked construction on the lake at the time that the graves were found tells me, “My mother and dad...they didn’t like the lake cause there was too many unaccounted graves underneath that lake.” He continues, “...I know there’s graves in there. But I don’t know if they ever got ‘em. And now you can’t find ‘em cause they’re in the water! ...The people that lived there lost somebody.” The graves covered by the lake are equivalent to the loss of relatives.

Shawnee people do not revisit the graves of those who have passed. They do, however, acknowledge and respect the presence of deceased relatives. One way to acknowledge the deceased is prescribed ritual feasts, commonly referred to in the literature as *ghost feasts* or *feasts of the deceased* (C.F. and E.W. Voegelin 1935; Jackson 2003a). Individual families hold feasts as an annual remembrance of deceased relatives. Feasts are important for commemorating the deceased, but they also placate the spirits’ appetites. There is the potential for spiritual and physical implications for the living in the event that family feasts are not conducted. A Shawnee person explains the repercussions of not holding feasts, “The dead people come back and maybe feed on the living, make them

sick. I don't think the spirits do it because they're evil or anything, it's just the way it is, they get hungry and can't help themselves; they have to feed" (Selstad 2003).⁸⁰ Feasts for the deceased are sometimes held conjunction with other occasions that call for feasts, such as marking particular harvests.⁸¹ Feasts can also mark the end of certain food restrictions for individual families.⁸² The feasts are widely held throughout the community today.

There are less ritually prescribed ways to acknowledge deceased relatives. Spirits eat at night (thus, feasts for the deceased are held at night). Therefore, a number of restrictions for the living are enforced regarding eating in the dark, transporting food in the dark, and running in the dark. I always took food to language class, but noticed that there were never leftovers to take back with me (even if all the food was not eaten). I once asked if I could take some extra food to an elderly person who had missed language class. I was reluctantly

⁸⁰ Charles Bluejacket recounts the importance of maintaining feasts for the deceased. He says, "So strong was the belief in this superstition, that even Christian Indians would practice it secretly, of course, in times of much sickness" (Spencer 1909: 322). This comment suggests a conflict between Christianity and ritual feasts. While most Shawnee church members do not maintain family feasts, it is not accurate to say that it is only Christian Indians who no longer maintain this practice. The practice has fallen out of practice among many Shawnee families. Finding a fluent Shawnee speaker to conduct the "talk" at the feast is increasingly a challenge, particularly as those who speak fluently and those who know what needs to be said are fewer.

⁸¹ There are a number of different types of feasts still conducted by many Shawnee families. Harvest feasts are held to mark the first harvest of different crops, including corn, beans, or maybe watermelon. Feasts marking the harvest can be held in conjunction with, or separate from, family feasts. Some families hold single annual feasts, while other families may conduct a number of different feasts marking different points of significance. Naming feasts are also still common at Shawnee naming ceremonies (see C.F. and E.W. Voegelin 1935).

⁸² I once took a cantaloupe to tribal language class. A woman saw the fruit and asked, "Who brought this cantaloupe?" Upon learning that I had brought it, she said to me, "Why would you bring a cantaloupe when you know most of us in this room can't eat it yet?" The woman was referring to the fact that many families adhere to certain food restrictions, including the prohibition of fresh corn or melons, until they have had their family feasts.

allowed to take the food after dark but was given specific instructions to toss a little food out the car window before getting on the road. It is also the case that dropping food while eating or spilling food outside is explained away as “someone must be hungry for that” (a reference to the idea that spirits eat at dark, but also a suggestion that some family is not conducting their feasts as they should).⁸³

Another way to respect the deceased is to stay away from the graves of the deceased, thus stay away from the lake. When asked why he did not fish in the lake, an Absentee Shawnee elder tells me, “I don’t want no part of that.” The reason: “They covered up a lot of graves.” Since the very first interview that I conducted in Little Axe in 2003 I have heard local lore about Lake Thunderbird that says the number of burials disturbed by the lake will determine the number of people who will perish in the lake. Newspaper headlines from the last fifty years suggest that Lake Thunderbird yields an unusually high level of destructive incidents, including accidental drowning, foul play, and unexplained deaths.

A tribal member comments on the loss of life at the lake:

...In the early days, the things that happened around the lake- people drowned, come out there and shoot themselves and stuff like this- and they’d say, ‘That’s what was causing this because of the bad spirits in the

⁸³ The spirit of a deceased person lingers in this world until proper funeral procedures are complete. Spirits may also linger in this world if their families do not conduct annual feasts to feed them. Thus, the spirits are hungry and may interfere with the living until they are “fed.” The responsibility of holding feasts is placed on the family of the deceased, but upholding this responsibility ultimately benefits all of the living.

water'. But things kind of fizzled down as people got...the older people were gone and the young people really didn't care. We don't revolve our lives around Lake Thunderbird. We go around, and go to work, you know. It's not really anything to sit there and admire.

The lake occupies an embattled place in the memories of many (mostly older) Shawnee people, and yet there persists a level of indifference about articulating these memories. The contests over the Lake Thunderbird project demonstrate how the notion of landlessness, or the social and cultural detachment from the land on which they physically reside, is a strategy for Absentee Shawnee people looking to define a sense of community without regard to place. The man's statement above suggests a level of ambivalence about the lake that I find to be somewhat surprising, yet prevalent among Little Axe tribal members.

Ambivalence: Reinscribing the Landscape

How do you account for this ambivalence, particularly within a community that has historically made efforts to avoid this very type of encroachment? I suggest that ambivalence, in this case, is rooted in the fact that Absentee Shawnee people in Little Axe have become detached from the land area that once served to separate them from others. The community of Little Axe is now home to many distinct groups, including a veritable stream of outside visitors to the lake. The Absentees in Little Axe do not have the land base away from outside oversight that they sought for many years. The appearance of ambivalence, even acceptance, within contemporary Shawnee stories of the lake

signifies one response by community members who continually reconfigure their relationship to the land and the various peoples who now occupy it.

Land has been central to the Shawnee's sense of community at least since the early twentieth century when it served as a barrier between the Shawnee and 'civilization.' Selstad's fieldwork with the Absentee Shawnee in the early 1980s underscores the "importance of Indian land to [the Shawnee's] survival as a group" (1986: 98). He writes, "Shawnees see a clear connection between land and culture: Those who sold their land also had to 'sell out' in terms of native traditions (and vice versa)" (1986: 25). The direct connection between land and culture is not as clear today. Two factors that make this correlation problematic include the increasing rate with which many Shawnee individuals maintain home places outside of Little Axe (and still manage to maintain local ceremonial commitments in Little Axe), and the fact that original land allotments in Little Axe are rapidly parceled out among many inheritors or sold to private outside buyers. Traditional activities (the usual stuff of "culture"), including ceremonial dances, football games, and traditional funerals, take place on "secluded" areas of land away from examination by outsiders. While large areas of secluded land are useful for these purposes, participation in these activities does not require permanent residence on these land areas.

Recall Warren's point that Shawnees in the historical period were "largely divorced from sacred places" (2005: 6). My emphasis on the power of

place in the lake narratives is not meant to point to an ideological, cultural or cosmological discontinuity between contemporary Shawnees and their colonial relatives. Rather, I point to the lake narratives as only one example of the discursive means by which Shawnee people work through the changing social boundaries in their community. Indeed, the idiom of place becomes a vehicle for negotiating the changing social and cultural landscape.

It is important to consider how “practices of displacement, such as the strategic (dis)placement onto even the ‘sorriest’ land, might emerge as *constitutive* of cultural meanings rather than their simple transfer or extension” (Clifford 1997: 3). The Shawnees in Little Axe did not become ‘culturally conservative’ as a result of their physical displacement; rather, their reputation for conservatism is fueled, in part, by the proactive measures taken to protect an autonomous, self-directed way of life despite their displacement. The Absentee Shawnee’s struggle to maintain cultural autonomy over the years has become embedded in stories of land and, more recently, *landlessness*.⁸⁴

Offered below is a quote from Webster Little Jim, Big Jim’s grandson, which echoes many of the sentiments expressed thus far:

[Big Jim] brought us into these blackjack hills. He thought he would pick out the poorest land so the white people would never want it and we would never have to move again. But we were moved- by the

⁸⁴ The state of Oklahoma celebrated its Centennial in 2007. The Lake Thunderbird example reminds us that, even as centennial celebrations reinforce a sense of collective heritage among some state residents, native communities continue to actively negotiate histories of land loss vis-à-vis the state.

dam- Thunderbird Dam. Sometimes I don't think the Indians have a chance. Settle on the sorriest land there was and they come and move us out... My grandfather thought when he moved us down here we would never have to move again... [Doris Duke Indian Oral History Collection 1969: M-14]

The Absentee Shawnees in the Little Axe community continue to navigate their desires for cultural privacy amidst increasingly parceled physical boundaries.

Absentee Shawnee people have strategically used land over the past century to define the physical, social and cultural boundaries that situate them apart from their neighbors. Their unwillingness to settle on land during allotment, their “desire” to settle on the sorriest of lands following statehood, and their indifference toward Lake Thunderbird and the surrounding land today: all are strategies used by Absentee Shawnee people to foster a sense of community during times when conditions for community life seem to be determined by others. The fragmented landscape of Little Axe today suggests that the local native community finds new ways to define and secure the boundaries of community life.

Discussions about the lake and other physical boundaries create a platform from which historically “contested and embattled terrains can be reinscribed, redefined, [and] remapped” (Bell and Valentine 1995: 230). The contested and embattled terrains that people told me about are less about actual geographic localities (i.e. the lake, tribal land, reservation boundaries, or city limits) as they are about larger transitions in Shawnee life (i.e. protecting

cultural autonomy, ensuring a way of life, maintaining distinctions between locals and outsiders, and reconciling tribal interests amidst municipal development). The discussion of church planting in the next chapters is illuminating to this point because its physical presence on former Indian land reminds us that the ongoing influx of outsiders (both Indian and non-Indian) continues to change the landscape. The presence of the Indian Baptist church and their efforts to engage the local community reinscribes the landscape yet again with a new set of negotiations. These negotiations have more to do with notions of culture and cultural membership, than they do land, race relations, or political autonomy. The ultimate position of the church here rests on its ability to negotiate the social and cultural boundaries- more than the physical boundaries- that seem to set them apart from their target community.

Changing Landscapes

Undesirable land that once ensured the Shawnee's separation from others now appears to serve the interests of lake-oriented developers and visitors, bringing in waves of economic development and blurring the physical and demographic boundaries between Little Axe and the expanding city of Norman. Nearly fifty years after the lake's completion, tribal members' stories about the lake fit into a much larger and long-term narrative about maintaining a distinct community amidst ongoing change. Consider this Shawnee woman's statement

made to me in 2003, “I wish I was so rich. I would buy all this land that people are putting up for sale...that way we could keep everybody out, keep them away from us.” Lamenting the changes to his community in the last thirty years, a young Shawnee resident of Little Axe told me in 2003, “One of these days... we’ll be able to see houses all around us. See, we always had this kind of like free country out here.” Only a few years after these conversations, the view of Little Axe from Highway 9 is markedly different.

In June 2006, I was invited by some Little Axe residents to accompany them to a Yuchi stomp dance in Kellyville, Oklahoma. We left Little Axe after dark and it was while sitting in the backseat of someone else’s car that I noticed slight changes to the landscape. I comment on these changes in my field notes:

Driving out of LA, it became obvious that the landscape was changing. For one thing, there were a few structures being put up on Highway 9 that would eventually be billboards. [The driver] said he was curious who would advertise on those. There was also a new clearing where [a drive-in fast food franchise] will be built. I don’t know if these changes reflect a growing population in the area, or just more traffic coming through.⁸⁵ Either way, I expect that it will continue to change in the direction of more economic development. I know that some local people do not like the ‘encroachment’ that seems to be ongoing. There are others (ref. the conversation had with [woman]’s sister about the tribe’s development) that would prefer the tribe build a hotel and restaurants in the area to increase the traffic to the casino. For one thing, such development would bring more people and would enable the tribe to be more economically competitive. Such changes would likely bring more than just economic growth...[Field Notes, May 26, 2006]

⁸⁵ Such changes could also reflect an increased spending capacity in the local area, or the merging of economic ventures between Little Axe and the surrounding municipalities.

Now the billboards advertise businesses not even located in Little Axe, a local fast food chain seems like it's been there for years, a Dollar General store has appeared, and the main road has expanded to expose houses that once were hidden from view. Transients, including anonymous drifters and lake visitors, remind community members why the once impassable Cross Timbers seemed like a really good place to settle at one time.

There are wider sets of circumstances disrupting the Little Axe area since the construction of the lake; increasingly, the Little Axe area is associated with high crime rates, a changing demographic, growing intolerance of cultural difference, and a surge of development of "cookie cutter" neighborhoods. A local non-Indian Little Axe resident describes "our community" as a "rough area" with a growing methamphetamine problem, and outsiders who finance local land only to "stay six months or a year and just drive off in their car and leave everything here." This observation suggests the need for a more refined sense of "outsider," whereby distinctions made according to "insider/outsider" status are no longer based solely on the categories of Indian/white. The following chapters consider how native mission workers who negotiate the barriers between themselves and the native community in Little Axe complicate such distinctions.

Negotiating Spaces

The first building that you see as you come into Little Axe, heading east from Norman, is a modest structure known as the old “community house.”⁸⁶ The community house once served as a meeting place for local Shawnee residents to congregate. The old white building originally sat on a lot now covered by Lake Thunderbird property; it currently occupies an unassuming location directly south of the highway. The building sits between a small wooded patch of land and a gated area that reads “AST Cemetery,” an area approved for Absentee Shawnee tribal burials. Many Absentee Shawnee families prefer to bury their deceased on their family land, or “home place,” but the tribal cemetery is available for those that choose to use it. The community house is frequently used for tribal wakes irrespective of the final place of burial.

It was here that I attended my first funeral wake in Little Axe during November of 2006. The following excerpt from my field notes offers an example of how local landmarks, such as the community house, become sites of active renegotiation of local spaces for local Shawnee people:

I did not know what to expect in terms of the funeral tonight. I knew that tonight would be the first of a number of proceedings in the entire funeral. [A couple of people] told me to dress warmly, and I assumed that this was because the community house (old white house next to tribal gas station) did not have a heater and that's where the wake would take place.

They refer to the period of sitting with the body as “setting up.” The entire funeral service lasts usually 4 days, but arrangements were

⁸⁶ See chapter three for more about the community house.

made this time around to have all services completed by Thanksgiving; her family said, "She would have wanted it this way so as not to intrude on family's thanksgiving meals."

I pulled up to the old community house around 7pm. There were many cars parked in the area surrounding the house. I saw people taking folding chairs out of their cars and realized that they would be "setting up" outside, behind the old house. Luckily I had a chair and a blanket in my trunk. I first took the peach pie I had made to the house and then went back to the car to grab the chair/blanket and head towards the house.

I did not know the procedure for anything at this point, so I moved quickly and hoped that someone would stop me if I did something inappropriate. I took the pie inside the house, though most people were sitting outside. There were only a few people inside and they were sitting near what looked to be the open casket. I did not look over; instead I tried to quickly locate the food so I could put my pie with the rest and get back outside. There were two large tarps/tents set up behind the old building, and a large fire built between these tents. The women were sitting to the west of the fire (facing the tribal store) and the men were sitting to the east of the fire (facing the direction of the south grounds). People were sitting in lawn chairs. Most of the women were wrapped in blankets. [The funeral leaders] were sitting with the men, but on the edge to the point where they were pretty well facing the community house. [One of the officiates] had some guys pull out a lounging chair so that he could sit in it.

There was casual conversation taking place underneath the tents. Men were not exclusively talking with men, and vice versa, but there was a clear separation between the two. People would walk around and shake hands with everyone when they got there; some would hug each other when they'd greet. There were no kids running around, though there were a few inside the house. I had been told before that Shawnee people do not bring children to funerals because it gives the impression to the spirits that they can take the child.

[A family member] said that [the deceased] would generally have been buried over [at the family's] land, and the services would have been over there, but [the deceased] said before she died that she wanted to be buried in the tribal cemetery next to her daughter.

I knew painfully little about Shawnee funeral protocol, as evidenced by my transporting baked goods in the dark, but even my ignorance then did not keep me from getting a very general sense of a Shawnee funeral. The atmosphere at a funeral is often genial and supportive, but actions, procedures and social spaces are also highly monitored. At one point during the evening, much of the family had retired to the community house for visitation, coffee, and warmth. A competitive game of cards was just underway when a middle-aged, rough-faced white man entered through the front of the house, an entrance that is not generally used during wakes. No one seemed to know the man, but he did not seem nearly embarrassed enough to have just walked in on a group of people sitting around a casket. He simply asked, “Is there a meeting tonight?” to which someone quickly gave him more explicit cues to leave.

The community house, or the “White house,” hosts regional AA and Al-Anon meetings, hence the unexpected visitor during the funeral. The anecdote about the unabashed ‘visitor,’ though he was exactly where he thought he should be, reminds community members that even the most private engagements must be continually negotiated with their non-Shawnee neighbors. The community house represents the decreasing number of physical spaces in Little Axe that are distinctly “Shawnee” in function. The community house once was a place to gather with other tribal members, receive food rations, hold pie suppers and

fundraisers, attend Christmas parties; such activities are now relegated to the tribal resource center facility up the road.

The standard use of the community house as a tribal funeral facility also indicates a growing tension experienced by tribal members who maintain a strictly ‘traditional’ way of life, while also finding it necessary to accommodate those tribal members who do not. Despite the local preference to keep funeral activities at the “home place,” there are plenty of Shawnee families who either no longer have family land, who choose not to perform tribal funerals on their property because they live “in town,” or because there are requests to have “combination funerals” (whereby portions of the funeral follow Shawnee tradition and others follow another tribal tradition, or perhaps a Christian-based protocol).⁸⁷ It is my experience that funerals, perhaps more than any other form of community engagement, are most revealing indicators of social tensions and expectations, cultural values, relationships, responsibilities, and the general practice of “working things out.”

The old community house is a somewhat conspicuous relic of how the social boundaries in the community have changed. A local Shawnee woman sums up the change as follows:

⁸⁷ The notion that a funeral practice is “strictly Shawnee” is contestable, in as much as there are increasingly competing ideas about what this means. Generally, a Shawnee funeral is one that is conducted in the Shawnee language, according to specific rules of family engagement and descent, and whose practices reflect an understanding and belief in a Shawnee worldview.

...Too many people. It's not like it used to be. Used to be, we knew everybody. Now, it's too many people moving in and too much stuff going on. You know, I can go down this one road where my sister- and I can show you the drug houses...I mean back whenever, I knew everybody. Right now, I don't know nobody... I think, there's a lot of Indians around. But I don't think it's predominantly anymore. Not like it used to. That's what we were known for was Indians. (JWB: Primarily Shawnee?) Uh huh. Oh yeah. But now it's not. I don't think it is. Too me it's just ruined. I feel that way. Like the Indians are losing again! (interviewee laughs)

Her comment points to the implications of letting community boundaries become blurred. While the intrusion of outsiders and some of their undesirable activities have altered the perception of the community for many native residents, there are long-standing mechanisms that work to differentiate “us” from “them.” These mechanisms are important for dealing with ongoing encroachment from specifically non-native municipal interests, but they also work to manage relationships with a host of outside native institutions that make their way into Little Axe.

Obligations and Community Ties: Insiders and Outsiders

Social boundaries in Little Axe today, not unlike most rural towns, are broadly based on an insider/outsider dynamic.⁸⁸ I began this ethnographic sketch describing Little Axe as an amalgam of distinct groups. There are opportunities to witness the collective nature of Little Axe, including the

⁸⁸ Shawnee people have historically organized according to systems of clan obligations, dance ground affiliations, and other forms of social organization. Social boundaries defined according to insider/outsider distinctions, while probably not absent from historical patterns of Shawnee social organization, are largely reflective of contemporary residential and social patterns.

following activities: public school activities, local sports leagues, fish fries and fundraisers, community homecoming celebrations, shopping at Country Boy (the local grocery), and garage sales. I spent time participating in all of these functions, but would hesitate to say anything too decisive about the Little Axe collective. My use of the term “Little Axe” refers to the geographic locality, and unless otherwise specified, I use the term “Little Axe Community” or “native community in Little Axe” to refer to the Absentee Shawnee portions of this community. Non-native portions of the Little Axe community are referred to accordingly, as “non-native” or “the greater Little Axe community.” Absentee Shawnee populations outside of the Little Axe area are identified according to general geographic communities, such as Shawnee, Tecumseh or Norman.

The Absentee Shawnee community in Little Axe exists as a separate and distinct group within the boundaries of the greater Little Axe community. This portion of the community participates in the collective activities listed above, but also maintains a distinct set of *native* cultural practices and activities that firmly set them apart from the greater non-native community. The following section introduces some of the native institutions currently active in the Little Axe community. These native institutions, and the social and cultural boundaries that they reinforce, prove central to the Indian Baptist church’s ability to negotiate a meaningful position within the Absentee Shawnee community at Little Axe.

The Role of Local and Outside Native Institutions

The Shawnee population in Little Axe participates in a number of specifically native institutions. Native institutions provide social fields and activities that differentiate the native community from the non-native community in Little Axe, but they also act as locally sanctioned sites for determining what is and is not acceptably deemed “native culture.” Local native institutions, which can be both ceremonial and secular in nature, generally consist of those social spaces that provide a platform for community members to promote locally meaningful aspects of native culture (i.e. language, social relations, cooking traditions, humor, and others).

Native institutions in Little Axe fall into two broad categories. The first category of native institutions, and most prominent in Little Axe, is the complex of dances, activities and rites that comprise the Shawnee ceremonial cycle. The second category of native institutions includes a variety of ‘outside’ native institutions that have forged meaningful attachments in the local Shawnee community. A brief introduction to both of these categories of native institutions is important for understanding how some ‘outside’ native institutions (like Native American Church meetings), and not others (like the newly planted Indian Baptist church), acquire meaningful positions in the local community.

Shawnee-specific Native Institutions

The most prominent native cultural institution active in the Little Axe community is the Shawnee ceremonial cycle, or the complex of social and ceremonial activities that take place at the local ceremonial dance grounds. The practices found within this ceremonial cycle are recognized as specifically Shawnee activities, and participation in these activities is largely limited to Shawnee people. Dance ground activities, including the biannual Bread Dance, the War Dance, and Indian football games, correspond to a similar set of practices found within a larger Woodland ceremonial complex. Woodland ceremonial grounds operate according to a highly communal structure whereby individuals and extended families approximating a “congregation” or a “group of people sharing a common cultural background” assemble “at a fixed location in order to undertake a regular calendar of religious rituals or ceremonies” (Jackson 2005: 174).

Ceremonial grounds are recognized as locally meaningful native institutions, in part, because they establish a “superorganic” foundation on which corporate cultural identities are formed and renewed (Jackson 2005: 174). Participation in the Shawnee ceremonial cycle links contemporary Shawnee people to their many generations of ancestors who came before them. Shawnee people understand their ceremonies to be given to them by the Creator, and it is understood by participants that it hopefully pleases the Creator and the ancestors

to look down and see Shawnee people continuing these ceremonies the best way they know how.

Standards for participation in Shawnee-specific ceremonial activities and other Shawnee-specific cultural practices, such as funerals and feasts, are determined according to fairly narrow terms. Shawnee-specific cultural institutions ensure highly exclusive membership on the basis of clearly delineated roles and responsibilities, widely held expectations to adhere to local standards of tradition and community engagement, and a willingness to commit to local forms of cultural practices over and above more general native practices. These mechanisms work towards the maintenance of content and meaning in cultural practices and they are established according to long held standards of cultural production. Those who do not adhere to these standards, or for whom these standards are inaccessible, fall outside of the boundaries of cultural conservatism that has come to stand for the Absentee Shawnee community in Little Axe.

Shawnee ceremonial activities in Little Axe are fairly exclusive in that the primary dances, such as the Bread Dances, are largely limited to participation by local Shawnee families. There are specific opportunities for participation in Shawnee ceremonial life by non-Shawnee native people, as described below, but central participation in Shawnee ceremonial activities is dictated according to Shawnee names, clans, and hereditary divisions. Some

Shawnee families living outside of the Little Axe area are certainly active in the broader ceremonial structure but, as stated earlier, Little Axe is currently the hub of Shawnee ceremonialism because it is currently the only Absentee Shawnee community with active ceremonial grounds. As such, ceremonial ground activities are largely maintained and patterned according to the practices of local families and local political structures.

Outside Participation

While many Shawnee ceremonial activities are highly exclusive, with participation consisting of mostly local Shawnee families, there are select ceremonial activities where participation by specific non-Shawnee outsiders is acceptable, and even expected. One such ceremonial activity is the annual War Dance. The War Dance is a Shawnee-specific dance that is maintained by the Kispoko, a division among the Shawnee that have “charge of matters pertaining to war and the preparation and training of warriors” (Alford 1936:44). The War Dance is a Shawnee-specific activity and yet participation by Kickapoo relatives is an integral component of the dance. The Turkey Dance is another example of a Shawnee activity performed in the ceremonial context, the success of which rests heavily on participation by neighboring Caddo friends and relatives.

Non-Shawnee specific native institutions

There are a number of non-Shawnee specific native cultural institutions active in Little Axe today that promote intertribal relationships and supportive networks between native communities. Two examples of such native institutions are stomp dances and peyote meetings. Stomp dances refer generally to a “nighttime dance repertoire familiar (with tribal and local variations) throughout eastern Oklahoma” (Jackson 2005: 175). Stomp dances are a form of social activities held in a ceremonial context and usually involve the support of many tribal or dance ground communities, either in the form of visitation or supportive participation.

Peyotism, or the general practice of peyote worship is a form of religious worship that is regularly practiced among select Absentee Shawnee families in the Little Axe area today. Peyote meetings are often held annually to commemorate birthdays, family reunions and personal accomplishments, or to promote general healing and well-being. These meetings are generally held by Shawnees who are also active in Shawnee ceremonial ways of life, but certainly not all Absentee Shawnee people are not active in the practice of peyotism. These two forms of religious worship are distinct, but the concurrent maintenance of both is acceptable. Daniel Swan says that Peyotism is “flexible and adaptable and thus readily adopted in new settings and situations” across native communities (1999: 6). Participation in peyote meetings is not dependent

on tribal membership, nor is it relegated to participation by native people only.⁸⁹

Participation in local peyote meetings in Little Axe, however, is generally exclusive on the basis of family memberships and personal networks.

Neither stomp dance or peyotism are seen by Shawnee people as central to their ceremonial way of life. These native institutions emerged into Shawnee ways of life from outside of the Little Axe community but they have gained prominence among contemporary Shawnee, namely, because these institutions and practices resonate at some level with traditional Shawnee practices and they work to preserve longstanding social relationships.

Reports suggest that peyotism, for example, was introduced among the Absentee Shawnees either around 1890 by a group of Kiowa-Comanche Indians, or around 1900 by a group of Kickapoo (Stewart 1989: 127; see also Swan 1999: 4).⁹⁰ Most community members today cite the Kickapoo introduction of peyote meetings into their communities. Tracing their introduction to peyote to the Kickapoo, in lieu of Kiowa, Comanche, or other tribal origin is not surprising given the historically close kin relationships between the Shawnee and the Kickapoo.⁹¹ The point is that peyotism, as an outside native institution,

⁸⁹ Peyote is a controlled substance and the legal use of peyote for religious purposes is granted for the ceremonial use of peyote for religious practices subsumed within the Native American Church, a formally charted religious denomination.

⁹⁰ Anecdotal reports from community members suggest that the introduction of Native American Church practices did not occur at any one time; rather, the form of worship and many variations of it were adopted by different families over a period of time.

⁹¹ The Shawnee maintain an “elaborate intertribal kinship system” that links the Shawnee to the Kickapoo as “first brothers” (Warren 2005: 74).

gained traction within the Little Axe community because its introduction into the community followed locally meaningful and longstanding avenues of cultural transmission. Importantly, the outside native institutions that have gained traction within the Little Axe community do not interfere with, and may even supplement, the maintenance of specifically Shawnee ceremonial practices.

There are also distinct sets of outside native institutions that have little or no traction in the local native Little Axe community. Broadly speaking, these involve activities such as powwows, gourd dancing, honor dances, and other forms of (Plains-style) social dancing that have otherwise gained prominence in a variety of native communities throughout Oklahoma. One exception is the annual contest powwow sponsored by the Absentee Shawnee Tribe's Thunderbird Casino which is held every summer in Little Axe. The powwow continues to grow in size every year and it attracts contest dancers from all over the state and beyond. There are only a few local Little Axe families that actively participate on the powwow circuit, and these families also usually attend the Thunderbird Casino powwow. Otherwise, the local Shawnees who attend the powwow do so as interested spectators, disinterested observers, volunteer or paid workers, or simply because it is something to do. Absentee Shawnee organizations, such as the Veterans Group or the Elders Group, occasionally sponsor small dances held in the Shawnee and Tecumseh areas. Little Axe

residents attend these dances, but their participation is often limited to observation or support.

“Powwow ways” are not “Shawnee ways” and attempts to combine the two are often looked down upon. Once during a Bread Dance a Shawnee woman commented to me that some young girls swung their shawls and bounced around too much, an indication to her that they were blurring the lines between powwow dancing and “our way.” Similarly, I have heard criticism of ceremonial dance clothes that appear to resemble the designs, colors or flashiness of powwow outfits; such criticisms contrast with the favor that is expressed for ceremonial outfits that resemble the “old way” of dressing.

Humor is a poignant form of social commentary, and is a way that Shawnee people make light of the social and cultural distance between themselves and many of their native neighbors. Consider the following field notes describing an incident that occurred at a North Ground stomp dance in June 2005:

At one point about 5am, [one of the men sitting under the brush arbor] went to his car to get what looked to be a hat. As he got back to the arbor, he put on this yarn hat that had black yarn braids that extended down about 2 feet. They were quite funny, and when he put them on you could hear a roar of laughter from underneath the arbor. The braids got passed around, each wearer getting the same roar of laughter. At one point, [one of the young men] had the braids on and he walked around the fire as if to start another song. He had his cane with him and he said in a southern Plains-type cadence, “Let’s get this powwow started, aaaaye.” Everyone laughed. This was a blatant [teasing] reference to “powwow Indians,” something that few of them are, I believe. At one

point, [an older man] had the braids on and he was sitting under the arbor holding something to look like a “peace pipe.”

On one hand, the “braids incident” likely served as a point of rejuvenation after a long night of dancing. On the other hand, this statement about “being Indian” was a clear reference about how these people see themselves in relation to neighboring Indian groups, even in comparison to those Shawnee that are “powwow people” more so than “stomp people.”

The laughter died down eventually, and all that was left of the joke was a silhouette of an old man with long braids watching a stomp dance. The flicker of the firelight is not enough to see why it is funny, and slightly ironic. This example reflects the locally acceptable distinction between being Shawnee and other ways of ‘being Indian’, including differences in hair style, speech cadence, and social activities. The exaggerated gesture of walking around the fire and announcing the commencement of the dance is also a not-so-subtle commentary about the willingness of some native people (i.e. powwow people) to treat their cultural practices as a type of public performance.

The above weekend of stomp dancing concluded with a ceremonial Indian football game. The older man who wore the braided wig just hours before says to me in the early morning hours, “So now what are we going to do for fun? The Thunderbird Casino powwow is this weekend. We should meet there.” I had gone with this man to powwows before. He talked occasionally of wanting to learn how to gourd dance. He even showed me the shawls and the fans he had gathered for this purpose. He asked a Shawnee elder about the gourd dancing

and was told that he should not do it, in part because it was not “Shawnee” but also because he held a central role at one of the ceremonial grounds. He seemed a bit disappointed at this advice, but ultimately shrugged off the idea of gourd dancing.

The examples of Shawnee-specific and non-Shawnee specific native institutions underscore the nuanced conditions by which some practices and institutions (and not others) become accepted as locally meaningful native institutions. Participation in Shawnee-specific ceremonial practices is largely conditioned according to highly exclusive measures, usually family or clan-based obligations; as such, these particular native institutions establish sharp distinctions between who is and who is not a member of the local ceremonial community that has come to represent the Shawnees in Little Axe. Some non-Shawnee specific native institutions, such as stomp dance and peyotism, are able to establish meaningful positions in the Little Axe community because these institutions contribute to the maintenance of inter and intra-community relationships, musical and dance forms that promote Shawnee language use, and historical narratives that link Shawnee people to their relatives. The significance of locally accepted native institutions is that they promote a level of cultural conservatism that powerfully distinguishes the Absentee Shawnees in Little Axe from their native neighbors throughout Oklahoma. The distinction of cultural

conservatism, described more fully below, proves central to the ultimate position of the newly planted Indian Baptist Church in its target community.

Cultural Conservatism: Introduction

Ethnography related to the Shawnee consistently depicts the Absentee Shawnee as the most culturally conservative of the three Shawnee tribes (Absentee, Loyal, and Eastern), with the level of white acculturation the least among the Absentee Shawnee (Alford 1936; Howard 1981; Schutz 1975; E.W. Voegelin 1944). The ethnological and local classification of “cultural conservatism” most often refers to the community’s longstanding, active ceremonial life. Consider this statement from Joab Spencer in 1908: “The Shawnees cling to their old customs, seemingly more reluctant to abandon their ancient rites than any other civilized tribe” (Kansas State Historical Society 1908: 387). James Howard, a more contemporary scholar who worked with a large number of tribal communities in Oklahoma in the twentieth century, says of modern Shawnee ceremonialism:

...it would appear that changes in the overall Shawnee ceremonial pattern have been slight. Hence, with the Shawnees, one sees forms preserved that probably characterized many related Algonkian-speaking groups that have since lost their ceremonialism because of White acculturation.
[1981: 223]

Scholarly treatments, such as Howard’s, depict ceremonial ground activities as unchanging cultural performances that link contemporary Shawnee people to the

many generations of Shawnee that danced before them. Participation in the ceremonies, not the intact quality of them, is what links Shawnee people to their ancestors. It is such depictions of Shawnee cultural activities as unchanged relics of the past that overlook the mechanisms within the ceremonial ground structure to deal with dynamic situations.

Shawnee people, along with scholars, validate the reputation of conservatism that has been placed on them. An Absentee Shawnee man says in an oral history 'conversation' in 1968 (no tape recorder was allowed), "Them other bunches of Shawnee are well known...but we are the Absentee Shawnee, and not well known." He goes on to say, "All those other groups just sell their ways away but we held onto ours. We don't sell them and don't get nothing for them. We still have old ceremonies and pray to old gods. We have it in a secret way though" (Doris Duke Indian Oral History Collection 1968: M-6, Western History Collections). An Absentee Shawnee tribal member more recently explains to me that the Shawnees in Little Axe, particularly those belonging to the Big Jim Band, are sort of like "renegades" and this status enables them keep dancing in the old ways.

The classification of cultural conservatism also emerges from comparisons that Absentee Shawnee people make among themselves in comparing their own communities to those of their native neighbors in various parts of Oklahoma. Thus the Shawnee of Little Axe recognize greater cultural

conservatism in their community in contrast to those Absentee Shawnee living in the cities of Shawnee, Tecumseh and Norman. Absentee Shawnee tribal members will similarly contrast themselves with their geographical neighbors the Pottawatomie, who are perceived to be highly acculturated vis-à-vis distinctly native social and cultural institutions. On the other hand, comparisons with the Oklahoma Kickapoo are formed upon similarities found in their spoken languages (and efforts at language preservation), the possession of large ceremonial and social dance song repertoires, shared histories of resisting encroachment, and their general reticence from participating as subjects in social scientific research.

There has been relatively little extended anthropological research done in collaboration with Absentee Shawnee people in Little Axe. I was once candidly asked by a young Shawnee woman hearing of my research interests, “Didn’t the last person to publish something about the Shawnee die unexpectedly?”⁹² I have only rarely heard this particular sentiment, but it is nearly always the case that any invitation to engage the community is met with explicit restrictions relative to the maintenance of community privacy.

Most restrictions having to do with community engagement involve ceremonial activities; namely, there are no recording devices allowed during

⁹² This remark refers to the sudden death of James Howard who wrote *Shawnee! The Ceremonialism of a Native American Tribe and Its Cultural Background* (1981).

ceremonial ground activities.⁹³ There are equally vehement feelings against



The sign at the entrance of a ceremonial dance ground in Little Axe reads, “TAPE RECORDERS OR CAMERAS OF ANY KIND ARE NOT ALLOWED DURING MAIN CEREMONIES.”

recording specific aspects of Shawnee culture, including language, family genealogies, individual portraits, prayers, material culture, ceremonial protocol, Indian names, and even

everyday conversations. The idea of taping personal answering machine

recordings in the Shawnee language was suggested once at the community language class, but was quickly rejected by a few that saw such recording as inappropriate. I had no specific problems using my recorder in formal interviews with local Shawnees or during language class, but respondents do ask that recording be suspended or altogether stopped at the mentioning of some sensitive subject matter.⁹⁴

Recording of ceremonial activities, particularly by outsiders, is highly monitored. Both private and public examples of recorded data on Shawnee language, songs, and prayers exist, though there remains a great deal of critical discussion among community members about the purpose and usefulness of

⁹³ Restrictions on the use of recording devices are not standardized across Woodland ceremonial ground communities. (see Jackson 2010).

⁹⁴ Keep in mind that the majority of taped interviews for this research were conducted with church members who, even if they are Absentee Shawnee, typically do not adhere to the strict ideas of cultural privacy found in Little Axe.

such documentation. It is my experience that the prohibitions on documentation of cultural practices have less to do with the act of documentation, *per se*, and more to do with the nuances of knowledge transmission, ideologies of language loss and preservation, the maintenance of community boundaries, upholding of responsibilities (including personal, clan-based, familial and ceremonial responsibilities), and rights to privacy. It is the violation of these values and cultural responsibilities that appears to be more objectionable than the documentation of “Shawnee culture,” *per se*.

The tendency among community members to refrain from participation in various ‘outside’ projects, including scholarly research, university partnerships, and public interest projects, appears to be lessening to some extent. I have seen varying degrees of outside interest in the Absentee Shawnee tribe within the last six years; alongside my own field research, I have observed the presence of a handful of professional researchers, three college field school groups, individual undergraduate and graduate student researchers, state park organizations, proposals for university partnerships, and a team of nationally accredited film directors and crews. Every one of these parties, including myself, have been met with varying degrees of resistance by community members on the general premise that the details of Shawnee culture should not be documented (particularly by outsiders). Perhaps it should not go without

saying that nearly all of these parties were granted permission to conduct their work, though some received more critical commentary than others.⁹⁵

Interests of Outsiders and “Outside Interests” in Local Life

Visitors who seek to learn about the life and ways of the Absentee Shawnee are often directed to ceremonial ground activities taking place in the Little Axe community, which is slightly paradoxical given the particularly private nature of this community. However, there is a long-standing history of interest in, and support of, local Shawnee ceremonial life by various “outsiders,” including native members of other ceremonial grounds and non-native residents from the Little Axe area. An elderly Shawnee man in Little Axe recounts a story about some local “white folks” that would practice stomp dancing during the day and then come visit the Shawnee stomp dances at night. He recalls that Grandpa Little Jim, chief of the grounds then, did not allow white people to dance at the Old Ground. The white folks, who were friends with some of the younger Shawnee people, would wait until Little Jim went to sleep and “the one white boy and two white girls would borrow cans and dance all night long with them.” The elder’s story about the local “white folks” is similar to other stories

⁹⁵ The acceptance of outside interest in the community appears to have less to do with permission being sought or a definitive reluctance by the community to participate. Rather, it seems that most decisions about outside projects have more to do with the actual process by which the community members assess its longterm affect to the community.

that I have heard about the occasional participation in local Shawnee activities by local whites.

There is an important distinction between the interest of whites from the greater Little Axe community and the more threatening sense of “outside interests” that comes in the form of researchers, profiteers, and others looking to benefit from community engagement. Increasing levels of “outside interests” in the ceremonial life of the Shawnee contributes to ongoing tensions among those community members who see value in participating in these projects and those who desire privacy and isolation from an outside world whose unmitigated encroachment seems inevitable.

The tensions in the community that erupt in response to outside interests reiterate many of the historical tensions that once defined the schism between the “conservatives” and the “progressives.” This schism, a distinction that unfolded after the initial period of Dawes land allotments, continues to unfold in unforeseen ways in the contexts of contemporary native life, including political life versus community life, town Indians versus country Indians, traditionalists versus Christians, older ceremonialists versus younger ceremonialists, and many other categories of distinction.

The distinctions between those who welcome outside interests and those who oppose such projects are not clearly defined, and the future extent of outside participation in local Shawnee life is unknown. I can say without

hesitation that restrictions on the documentation of certain practices and ceremonial spaces have always been defined for me (either explicitly or otherwise). These restrictions are important; at the very least, they protect the community and they protect me, they differentiate my relationships in the community from my work in the community, and they instill in me a sense of responsibility to this community that tolerates my presence. These restrictions are also necessary; outside interests in local concerns create an environment ripe for explosive engagements, arguments, and contests over cultural membership. The following section explores the presence of a film crew in Little Axe as an example of the tensions that emerge as outside interests conflict with local concerns.

“We Shall Remain”: Lessons Learned

The summer of 2006 brought a Boston film crew to the community of Little Axe, and it was the explosive events that followed their presence that made me understand the importance of cultural autonomy and the complexities involved in its maintenance. The film crew made a number of visits to Little Axe to gain community participation and “buy in” for their upcoming documentary film series entitled *We Shall Remain*.⁹⁶ One episode in this film series, “Tecumseh’s Vision” highlights the famed Shawnee warrior Tecumseh.⁹⁷ The

⁹⁶ <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/weshallremain/>

⁹⁷ http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/weshallremain/the_films/episode_2_about

film's directors, Ric Burns and Chris Eyre, hoped to supplement the film about Tecumseh with intimate portrayals of local Shawnee life. The crew members came to Oklahoma on a couple of occasions and met with tribal residents, attended tribal language classes, and visited at least one of the ceremonial dance grounds in Little Axe.

The crew expressly sought to capture sensitive images of contemporary Shawnee life, including images of the ceremonial grounds and Shawnee football matches, despite the irrelevance of Tecumseh to contemporary Absentee Shawnee life and historical self-understandings.⁹⁸ I was present throughout the duration of the film crew's stay. I found it a bit odd to observe the crew's highly contested efforts to document very private aspects of Shawnee life. For one thing, I was in the community as an anthropologist seeking to document- in my own way- a version of community life. On the other hand, I also felt that I understood enough about community preferences for privacy to know what types of documentation crossed the line.

The community gathered on multiple occasions to voice their concerns about the film and to reiterate their longstanding tendency to refrain from participation in such projects. The crew met every concern expressed by a community member with an insistent, almost abrasive, effort to "bargain" their

⁹⁸ The life of Tecumseh and his brother Tenskwatawa, the Prophet, is most closely affiliated with the bands of Shawnee that remained near the Ohio area as other bands of Shawnee dispersed throughout the southern region of the country.

way into an agreement. If the community would not allow the taping of a ceremonial football game, the crew asked, “Could you stage one in a parking lot somewhere?” Local concerns found voice at town-hall type meetings. One tribal member at the first community meeting stood defiantly in front of members from all ceremonial grounds and was nearly overcome by her intense disagreement with this project. Most of those present agreed with her sentiment, though many also dismissed her claims on grounds that she had abandoned ceremonial life for a while. A Kickapoo tribal member from a neighboring community stood up and cautioned everyone from participating in the film at the expense of the community’s values; again, most agreed with the sentiment but others became angry that the man was challenging the convictions of a community of which he was not fully a member.

The film’s director, Ric Burns, describes his experience being at this meeting in an online interview with Austin360.com:

...There were arguments, because this history is alive. We visited the Shawnee in Oklahoma. And to this day, as you know, there is cultural antagonism, there is enmity, there is suspicion. Chris (Eyre) and I stood up in front of hostile groups of Absentee Shawnee in Little Axe, Okla., who wanted to know: “What is your motive in making this film and telling this story?” And: “What would we get out of it. Would we get anything back?”

The interviewer asks, “What did you tell them?” Burns responds:

...That this is the substance of American history, that it’s part of the cultural birthright of us all, that one of the great shames is that we Americans don’t know enough about any of our history, and we don’t

know enough especially about Native American history, and that we would not rest until we had made sure we had done everything we could to tell the story with integrity, and with as much power as possible. And that we had come not to diminish their culture- but to celebrate it [Buchholz, Austin360.com, April 20, 2009].⁹⁹

Burns' use of the word "hostile" to describe a group of people concerned about the public portrayal of highly protected cultural practices is troubling. Perhaps more troubling, at least for some native people, is Burns artful description of Shawnee cultural practices as part of "our history" and "part of the cultural birthright" of all Americans.

It became evident to everyone that the crew would not get the shots of ceremonial life that they really wanted. The film was completed with nominal cooperation from Absentee Shawnee community members, including filmed interviews with select individuals, participation as "extras" by one family, and language translation assistance. In the process of coming to terms with this project, however, community life was disrupted and highly intimate portions of community culture and social relationships were revealed. The crew became witness to the processes by which the community of Little Axe functions, negotiates, and carries on amidst disagreements.

I do not know the ultimate lesson learned from the *We Shall Remain* film experience, but it was an interesting exercise in both obtaining community

⁹⁹ http://www.austin360.com/blogs/content/shared-gen/blogs/austin/tvblog/entries/2009/04/20/ric_burns_and_we_shall_remain.html, accessed September 13, 2009

consent and working through the insider/outsider divide. I do not think that the ultimate lesson has to do with seeking local permission to conduct research. Rather, the film experience speaks to the role of cultural commitment and privacy in this community, and the dangers that outside researchers and other outside interests pose to the ideal of cultural privacy. Reiterating an earlier statement, it is the violation of local values and cultural responsibilities (by insiders and outsiders) that appears to be more objectionable than the documentation of “Shawnee culture.”

The example of the “We Shall Remain” film experience suggests that outside interests, even those that purport a particular concern for Shawnees and their culture, represent a risk to local social and cultural boundaries. My reason for elaborating on the distinction between “local” and “outside interests” is that these distinctions are central to the story of church planting in this community.

Native Christian mission workers who enter the community of Little Axe to plant an Indian Baptist church are yet another configuration of “outside interests” in the local community. The Indian Baptist Church at the center of this research has yet to gain traction in the local Little Axe community in the same way that other outside institutions, like peyote meetings, have been accepted over the years. One possibility for this is that the Baptist Church, similar to other “outside interests” who expected the community to change its standards, emerged in response to a perceived outside need for the community to change.

There are potential risks to the long-term stability of the Indian Baptist church if it continues to be seen by local residents as only an “outside institution” without also being relevant to a Shawnee way of life. Cultural conservatism is discourse about Shawnee native culture, but it is also a discursive tool for Shawnee people to define the rules of cultural production in such a way that limits the participation of some. The following section considers the powerful role of cultural conservatism as a discourse within which outsiders (including both church planters and researchers) must find ways to navigate.

Cultural Conservatism: Its Potency, and the Problem for the Indian Baptist Church

The reputation for cultural conservatism among the Absentee Shawnee finds expression in the most unexpected places. The following example is from a sermon given by a young Pottawatomie pastor at the annual Indian Falls Creek Baptist revival in Davis, Oklahoma. The pastor’s message encompassed his own struggle with being raised in a “traditional” Indian household, while also being a “born again” Christian. His experiences being raised in a “traditional” lifestyle included participation in the Cedar Lodge Church, dancing in area powwows, and even his acceptance at the ceremonial Indian football games of some Shawnee Indians in Little Axe, an activity that, “they didn’t just allow anyone to

be a part of.” The young pastor references an invitation to a Shawnee football game to validate his participation in a “traditional” Indian life style.

The subtleties within this example are telling; most of the Shawnees that I know would not likely consider powwow dancing and Indian football games, much less Christian worship, as examples of a *traditional* Indian life style. It is also my experience that the same Shawnees would also venture to say that most young Pottawatomie men would not know the difference anyway (see earlier comment about community distinctions).

This example shows how the idea of cultural conservatism has become a pivotal point of contention in my own research, even as I explore the complexities of something like Native Christianity outside of the Little Axe community. “Cultural conservatism” is problematic if only for its potent characterization of native communities, with a seeming lack of ethnographic examples on how such terms achieve this potency. Namely, the classification of ‘cultural conservatism’ promotes the idea of a fairly homogenous native community engaged in the maintenance of specific (traditional) cultural conventions. The term itself proves to be, using the words of James Clifford, “historically and geographically vague, but symbolically and visually poignant” (1988:136). My own experiences in the community lead me to see both the useful and the imprecise ways with which a term like ‘cultural conservatism’ captures the subtleties that exist within and between communities.

I argue that cultural conservatism, as a phenomenon of measuring degrees of cultural commitment in contemporary native communities, is analytically problematic at both the academic and local levels. It would be negligent to ignore the implications of problematizing ‘cultural conservatism’ in the local community(ies) within which I also frame the problem. Consideration must be given to how such classifications are employed by members of the community.

I return to the example of the *We Shall Remain* film experience. Was the Absentee Shawnee’s reputation for cultural conservatism a driving force for that project? The Shawnees in Little Axe, perhaps more than Shawnees elsewhere, maintain the ceremonial practices as closely to the image that the film crew hoped to depict. The Shawnees in Little Axe have more fluent Shawnee speakers than other Shawnee populations in the state. The Shawnees in Little Axe, despite the historic separation of Tecumseh’s band from the bands that became the Absentees, were expected to reveal a way of life that harkens back to an earlier time.

It is not to say that it is inherently wrong for the film crew to expect the Shawnee’s contemporary way of life to be a reflection of an earlier way of life. There are many facets of local community life that blur the lines between here and now, especially for the casual observer. For example, a number of Shawnee households still maintain outside cooking fireplaces, similar to those found at

the ceremonial ground camps, for preparing fresh harvests. The use of outdoor fireplaces, alone, is not indicative of a specifically Shawnee way of life. Outdoor fireplaces for ceremonial purposes, however, require the presence of “grandpa fire.” This particular fire is acknowledged as an “Indian fire” by virtue of its distribution of blessings to those who respect it according to the ways provided to the Shawnee people.¹⁰⁰ “Grandpa fire” provides blessings and reveals direction, but disingenuous behavior in its presence is an invitation for ominous implications.¹⁰¹

A number of local families also continue to plant gardens that provide crops for personal, family and community uses.¹⁰² Growing crops harkens back to an older way of life but, more important, it is central to the continuation of a ceremonial way of life. The following comment from a young Shawnee man from Little Axe suggests the importance of gardens to the ceremonial dances, “We get people that go, ‘We want to pay somebody to grow this corn for us’ - To me- whoa, whoa, time out...If we’re going to pay somebody to do this, why don’t we just pay them to go dance for us too?” The significance of planting corn to the Shawnee, as with many of their Woodland neighbors in Oklahoma, is

¹⁰⁰ The significance of fire is widespread among native Woodland communities (see Jackson 2003a: 42).

¹⁰¹ Jackson also comments on the binary nature of “grandpa fire” according to Yuchi ways (2003a: 77).

¹⁰² According to the June 2006 Absentee Shawnee Tribal Newsletter, the tribe tilled twenty-five individual gardens for tribal members. This number is for all Shawnee communities, not just Little Axe, though most large gardens are more likely in the rural areas of Little Axe than the more urban areas of Shawnee and Tecumseh. This number also does not include those gardens worked by individuals with their own equipment.

part of the adherence to a larger belief system that reminds families of their obligations to their deceased and to their living.

The point here is that there are implications for *representing* Shawnee culture at the expense of *doing* Shawnee culture, whether it is neglecting your family feast or not planting your own corn. Some Shawnees will tell you how “Grandpa fire” will “tell on you” if you’re not being true. The two examples here remind us that the Shawnee’s reputation for conservatism is founded upon the importance of *doing* their way of life, more so than any absolute refusal to document it or engage with outsiders. The Shawnee’s history of engaging with outsiders has had damaging effects on their ability to continuing doing their way of life. It has yet to be in the favor of Shawnee people, as far as I can tell, to fully open their “stuff of culture” to outsiders.

The notion of cultural conservatism is analytically problematic, for reasons suggested above, but it is precisely for these reasons that it also incites provocative questions. For example, how does the label of cultural conservatism condition the relationships that community members maintain within and between other native communities? Does a claim to cultural conservatism, by native communities and those that study them, provide levers for negotiating identities within a local (or larger) context?

Perhaps the term cultural exclusivity is a useful counterpart to cultural conservatism. For one thing, the notion of exclusion suggests an attention to

boundaries. The notion of exclusivity is useful for looking at community measures taken to monitor participation within and outside of local boundaries. Cultural exclusivity suggests a process whereby community members actively engage in a way of life that markedly separates them from others, defends their right to privacy from outside intrusion, and creatively negotiates the meaningfulness of their community in a space that is no longer just their own. Cultural conservatism, on the other hand, implies an ideal of cultural homogeneity that has little grounding in day-to-day community life. Both “conservatism” and “exclusivity” are poignant and relevant concepts, but they suggest very different processes; “conservatism” reflects an ideological boundary while “exclusivity” suggests a process of social positioning. Ultimately, both concepts have a place in the discussion to follow because the story of native-led church planting in Little Axe is one of positioning within and against the limitations of such an ideological and social boundary.

A Final Note Regarding Fieldwork on Native Christianity in Little Axe

Very early during my master’s fieldwork I interviewed a middle-aged Shawnee man in Little Axe about his experience with diabetes. The interview was fairly ‘cut and dry’ until I turned off the recorder. He then told me that he would not be the one to tell me the things about Shawnee culture that I wanted to know. He continued to caution me against the presumption that anyone in

their community would be eager to help me capture the details of Shawnee culture, a living culture, and rework it into words on a page from which others could take. My attempts to record Shawnee culture, in this view, do nothing to ensure the continuation of his way of life.

The first thing to come to mind was the words of Vine Deloria, Jr., haunting me in only the way that Deloria himself would have wanted: “we [Indian people] should not be objects of observation for those who do nothing to help us” (1988: 94). The next thing I thought was something written by Leif Selstad, the Norwegian anthropologist who accompanied me on my first real visit to Little Axe: the Shawnees see their culture “as something original and absolute, that has to be maintained separate and vigorous, protected from white intervention” (1986: 51). Recording parceled pieces of Shawnee culture does nothing to “carry the world along,” an understanding that Selstad himself grappled with in his own decision to write about Shawnee culture (1986: 131-132).

The middle-aged man’s unwillingness to be a convenient informant for me was not only a matter of personal preference but also a reflection of a deeply embedded community preference. Recall my first interaction with the elderly Shawnee man, Chief Little Jim’s descendent, discussed in the beginning of this chapter: his willingness to help me was noteworthy because he was “really forthcoming” and Selstad understood the consequences of this. The eagerness of

community members to help is not an invitation to ignore the preference for privacy that exists at the community level.

My experiences with these two men illustrates well the delicacy with which cultural material is to be handled, by both insiders and outsiders alike. I secured an interview with the middle-aged man only after multiple attempts to gain his consent. The man controlled the content of the interview according to local standards of information sharing. In contrast, I interviewed the elder of the two men on multiple occasions, in addition to having numerous casual conversations over the years. The day after my final interview with the elder of the two men, I received a phone call from him asking me to not use the interview that we had just conducted. Instead, he thought in retrospect that it was best to just “let a sleeping dog lay.” The willingness of one community member and the seeming unwillingness of another are two sides of the same coin. Both men told me the things I would need to know to navigate my way through their community, but they both did so according to widely shared understandings about cultural disclosure. It was these interviews that helped me understand the personal and collective nature of cultural privacy, and how I would reconfigure my research interests to respect it.

The subject of Native Christianity as a research interest first appeared to be “safe” in the sense that it has to do with a native institution that has not yet established locally meaningful attachments in the Little Axe community.

Mission workers at the Indian Baptist church value my willingness to tell their story of planting an Indian work in Little Axe. Such exposure is critical for a newly planted church struggling to gain visibility and traction in their target community. My tendency to ask questions about the church also did not infringe on local ideals of cultural privacy in the same way as if I were asking questions about Shawnee ceremonialism.

While the subject of Native Christianity emerged as a “safe” alternative to research on more delicate subjects (i.e. things of a ceremonial nature), the actual process of working in the church revealed quite a bit about the nature of cultural production in the Little Axe community. There are a number of Absentee Shawnee families in Little Axe who are self-proclaimed Christians or who attend Christian churches, including even some of the most prominent families at the ceremonial grounds. There is not an inherent conflict between Christianity and ceremonialism, and yet the church struggles to be seen as a local institution. The newly planted Indian Baptist church entered the community of Little Axe as an *outside* institution and a *new* institution, both of these features ensure that the church is not yet part of the locally meaningful composition of the community.

The church made the Absentees Shawnee population in Little Axe its target population. The community, in turn, remains largely indifferent to the church’s presence. The next chapter explores one strategy used by church

members to forge meaningful attachments within its target community from the margins.

V. Fostering Inclusion: In the Field, On the Ground, and Beyond

We, however, will not boast beyond measure, but within the limits of the sphere which God appointed us—a sphere which especially includes you. For we are not overextending ourselves (as though our authority did not extend to you), for it was to you that we came with the gospel of Christ (2 Corinthians 10: 13-14, NKJV)

Below is an excerpt from a mass email sent out on March 6, 2008, by Victor Cope, executive director of Indian Falls Creek and pastor of First Indian Baptist Church of Moore. The email reads, in part:

We are not taken seriously in the Christian community. I believe the following has contributed to the image that others have of us: growth is slow, our missions may be a mission for decades, losing ground when it comes to reach our people, no mega churches, low baptism rate, lack of resources, losing our young people, lack of pastors, lack of power; Indian time, no unity and always having our hand out. The Christian community does not believe that we can actually reach our people. I believe we can do “All things through Him.” Nothing is impossible... Every moment we wait more and more of our people will be denied the opportunity to know Jesus. This is no time to be proud. We are not insignificant!

The email was sent to an extensive network of Indian Baptists across the state of Oklahoma. I first received this email as part of a mass email update from the pastor of Cornerstone. I then received the same email as part of the monthly “Indian Falls Creek Update/Miscellaneous” newsletter, a mass email from the

Indian Falls Creek committee that is “a service to our people.”¹⁰³ It was during a Wednesday evening service at EIBM that I heard the contents of Victor Cope’s email yet again. The pastor at EIBM read the email in its entirety to the congregation that evening.

Cope challenges the perception of Indian Christians as “insignificant” in the greater Christian community, stating clearly that he does “not consider myself or our people to be insignificant. I pray that God would use us, a people that were once numerous and now small numerically, to lead this Nation back to God.” This email quickly made its rounds in the virtual networks, but I assume the content of its message has been in the works in Indian churches for some time. A native pastor from a newly planted Indian mission contextualizes Cope’s email this way,

As Brother Victor Cope stated, you know, it’s a sad state for our Indian churches, you know. That was direct from him and his heart and a lot of other pastors and preachers. They were at a time when the Indian churches were growing and now they’re at a time when they see no growth at all. It’s very discouraging to them.

The pastor offers his own solution to the problem, “We’re not saved to sit, we’re saved to serve. That is one of the reasons we stopped growing as churches

¹⁰³ The postscript on this email includes the following statement: “Please pass this information onto your email contacts, MySpace accounts or print off for a local church that does not have Internet access. Pray that God would lead us to do the impossible.” Such mass emails are common ways to hear about upcoming events, revivals, conferences, prayer requests, special announcements, or any other timely information. A more thorough attention to social networks between Indian Baptist congregations and individuals would greatly benefit from attention to virtual forms of communications, such as email chains, as important modes of information transmission, organization, and even witnessing.

because people just don't go out and evangelize like they once did." Cope's solution to the problem of invisibility among Indian Christians offers a more collective approach: "...renew our efforts to unify our Indian Baptist work in Oklahoma. I still believe we can do more together if we can ever get along." The notion of insignificance that both pastors challenge here is based on the perceived ability of Indian Christians to be *effective* witnesses for the Lord in their own communities.

Native pastors across the state acknowledge the work that remains in their own Indian churches but also are firmly rooted in the belief that Indian Christians are central to the fundamental calling of all Christians to witness to others about the promise of Christianity. This calling, known as the Great Commission, is based in biblical scripture that reads, "Go therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the age. Amen" (Matt. 28:19-20, NKJV). The Great Commission is the driving theological message of the Southern Baptist Convention, and it is the basis of the mission work taking place in the Indian churches represented in this research. The SBC's primary statement of faith and doctrine, the *Baptist Faith & Message*, reinforces the importance of mission work in Christian communities everywhere: "The Lord Jesus Christ has commanded the preaching of the gospel

to all nations. It is the duty of every child of God to seek constantly to win the lost to Christ by verbal witness undergirded by a Christian lifestyle, and by other methods in harmony with the gospel of Christ” (BF&M Article XI).¹⁰⁴

One method used by Indian churches to “win the lost to Christ by verbal witness” is to use various discourses of inclusivity to establish points of attachment in their target communities. This chapter explores the conditions by which newly planted churches selectively participate in discourses of inclusivity for the purposes of managing multiple, and often competing, positions in the mission field and beyond. Membership in various cultural institutions has the power to forge meaningful connections *and* differences; therefore, the task here is to consider the various forms of membership at stake for Indian Baptist churches positioned both within and against their target communities.

My use of the term *membership*, as previously stated, refers to the various points of attachment (or exclusion) forged between distinct entities. The challenge for newly planted Indian Baptist churches is to establish a specifically localized sense of relevancy in their target native communities, while also maintaining a meaningful role in the broader Baptist community. Participation in both the target communities and in the broader Baptist community is central to the growth of newly planted churches. Participation in both arenas, however,

¹⁰⁴ The *Baptist Faith & Message* is the primary statement of beliefs and convictions held by the three churches in this research.

proves difficult for churches whose points of attachment in their target communities are somewhat tenuous and whose contributions to the broader Baptist community are perceived as insignificant.

Conversations with church members reveal distinct patterns of using a range of discourses, both inclusive and exclusive in nature, for the purpose of reaching their target communities. These discourses promote varying degrees of inclusivity and, subsequently, they produce varying degrees of community engagement. On the one hand, churches employ a highly inclusive discourse that promotes openness, ensures a far-reaching flock, and does not limit outreach to just native communities. The use of a highly generalized sense of inclusiveness in certain communities is problematic; an all-embracing approach by the church has potentially alienating implications in a culturally exclusive or private native community such as Little Axe. On the other hand, a more refined sense of inclusiveness is appropriate for churches whose stated mission is to target specifically native communities.

These discourses of inclusiveness attempt to create strong points of attachment by simply “being Indian.” Such attachments are meaningful but are ultimately ineffectual at the local community level. The relationship between newly planted churches and the broader Baptist community becomes increasingly important as churches struggle to gain traction at the local level. Therefore, the final portion of this chapter will consider the limits of

inclusiveness at the local level and how these limitations pave the way for local churches to become a collective *and* significant force in the broader Baptist community.

Establishing Inclusivity: Non-native Visitors, the Uncommitted and the Target

Sing to the LORD, all the earth; proclaim the good news of His salvation from day to day. Declare His glory among the nations, His wonders among all peoples. For the LORD is great and greatly to be praised; He is also to be feared above all gods (1 Chronicles 16:23-25, NKJV).

The primary message of Southern Baptist Churches is that Jesus Christ died for our sins and rose again, assuring eternal life and salvation to *all* who seek Him. The SBC denomination heavily endorses missions and maintains a “commitment to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the entire world” (SBC). All churches within this evangelical tradition, by virtue of their position on missions, are inclined to promote a message of inclusivity; Indian Baptist churches subsumed within the SBC are no exception to this.¹⁰⁵ While local outreach efforts for most Indian Baptist churches are aimed at the native residents of the surrounding areas, all church members with whom I spoke are careful to maintain a message of inclusivity that fosters some type of attachment beyond the native community.

¹⁰⁵ My use of ‘inclusivity’ is very different from its popular usage in politically motivated religious discussion in the general public. A search for “inclusivity” and “Christianity” on any internet search engine produces an array of discussions that posit “Christian inclusiveness” as a political position relative to alternative lifestyles, minority populations, social progressiveness, and evangelical liberalism.

There are many reasons, theological and otherwise, for Indian churches to reach beyond the native target community and include non-native members. The stated mission of the Indian churches in this research is to reach the native residents in the surrounding areas, and yet the importance of non-native members and visitors is essential in each of these churches. While members are not classified on the basis of “Indian” or “non-Indian,” it is the case that non-native members are critical to the life of most newly planted Indian churches. Non-Native church members occupy central positions in each of the three focus churches, including Associate Pastor, music leaders, pastor’s wife, Sunday school director, Interim Pastor, Deacons, Youth Minister, and other positions.

The composition of church congregations is discussed in the previous chapter, but it is worth reiterating that most non-native church members are as invested in the target communities as the native members, usually as a result of residential, social or work-related attachments in the community. It is also the case that most non-native church members have native spouses that are also members of the church. The distinction between native and non-native church members is largely irrelevant within the church. Both native and non-native church members, especially those who are either transplants or living outside of the community, occupy somewhat marginal positions in their target communities. The marginal nature of the positions held by church members

working in the more rural areas like Little Axe has more to do with being transplants in the community than being a native or non-native church member.

Efforts to include both native and non-native congregants relate directly to the doctrine of the SBC to “go unto all nations.” Highly inclusive discourses are especially important for Indian churches hoping to dispel the idea that Christianity is the “white man’s religion.” The following statement by a member of EIBM reflects this,

...I think our main focus should be about the Lord. So whether you’re Indian or white or black... I think it’s important to keep your heritage but I don’t think that should determine how a church is set up. As long as your main focus is on God and going to Heaven and saving people and all that...

The sanctioning of Christianity as the “white man’s religion” is a common theme in the literature on Native Christianity. It is also a belief frequently encountered by Indian Christians attempting to reach other native people. A native member of EIBM expresses her frustration with this belief and talks about a recent encounter she has with a native friend, “I just wish you could see this is not white man’s religion. This is God’s word, the Bible, and this is what it says to me.” Indian Christians have distinct ways of addressing the perception of Christianity as the “white way” and these are dealt with more thoroughly in later sections of this chapter.

There are purposeful reasons for church members to insist that Christianity is for everyone, even if such highly inclusive discourses run the risk

of alienating native people looking for a distinctly native form of worship.

Attempts to appeal to a wide sector of potential congregants are important for newly planted churches struggling to grow their congregation. Attendance in Indian churches is notoriously low, and inclusive discourse is an important strategy for ensuring visitation from a broad sector of the general community.¹⁰⁶

Visitors from the general population are critical to smaller native churches struggling to gain traction in the local target community. Visitors are especially important for churches whose current congregations are largely limited to the same core members from the church's inception. Ensuring at least a minimal number of non-native visitors is important in the absence of local native visitors and low retention rates.

The presence of non-native visitors suggests that Indian Baptist churches are reaching at least some sectors of their surrounding communities. Members at Cornerstone often joke that they are the "United Nations" because the church has increasingly become more diverse in its racial composition. The pastor says in a sermon one Sunday that the diversity in the church can be used to show others "that we love one another...all different backgrounds- everybody's welcome here. It doesn't matter in the site of God" (paraphrasing). It is my observation over the past four or five years that non-native individuals or

¹⁰⁶ Low attendance is not only a feature of Indian Baptist churches; Southern Baptist Churches across the country have experienced downward trends in congregation growth and retention. A recent report produced by the Southern Baptist Convention's LifeWay Resources indicates that membership rates across all Southern Baptist congregations are dropping, despite a slight growth in the number of churches.

families, especially those with no prior attachment to the Indian church, rarely maintain a consistent presence in the Indian churches. Even the sporadic presence of non-native visitors, however, is important in the absence of a consistent native presence- a “back up plan,” if you will. Visitors, both native and non-native alike, represent potential growth in the church.

The following examples describe occasions whereby my own status as a non-native visitor was worked out. These examples suggest the importance of non-native visitors in newly planted churches that are otherwise struggling to forge attachments with the target native population.

It was the first night of Cornerstone’s 2005 Fall Revival that I saw my name listed in the bulletin and learned I would be participating as an usher in the Friday evening service. Each night of the revival had a designated theme, including “Youth Night,” “Family Night,” and “Native Heritage Night.” The revival message and the meal coordinated with the chosen themes so that “Youth Night” offered kid-friendly foods like pizza and hot dogs, and “Native Heritage Night” had essentials like fry bread, copes corn and stew¹⁰⁷. “Native Heritage Night” may have even included some grape dumplings. I made no mention of said dumplings in my notes, so it is probably just wishful recollections. The fry bread, surely, was a staple.

¹⁰⁷ “Copes corn,” or “Cope’s Sweet and Dried Corn,” is a store- bought bag of dried corn that is usually prepared as a soup with boiled meat. I have only ever had this type of soup at Indian gatherings in and around central Oklahoma, including community dinners, fundraisers, funerals, weddings, meals prepared at the dance grounds, and other large gatherings. Copes corn soup is a staple at most community meals, although it has been my observation that fresh corn soup is almost always preferred over the dried, packaged alternative. I do not know the prevalence of Copes corn soup in native communities throughout Oklahoma, particularly among the Western tribes, but some type of corn soup is very common in the central and eastern parts of the state. Members of Cornerstone Indian Baptist Church prepared a large batch of Cope’s corn soup and fry bread as part of a community feed on the final day of their mission trip to Fort Belknap Indian Reservation in Montana. This dinner of corn soup served as a warm reminder of home for most of the mission team members, but it clearly did not hold the same meaning for the Fort Belknap community. Most community members were unfamiliar with such “corn soup” and hesitantly ate only enough to appear appreciative. The spaghetti served alongside the soup was much more popular.

I was not present at the planning sessions for the revival. My absence from these meetings prompted the planning committee to assign me with the duty of ushering on one night. I was fittingly assigned ushering duties on "Missions Night," a night with an emphasis on "international missions." I jokingly asked if there was a reason that I was assigned a role on "International Night" instead of "Native Heritage Night." My attempt to make light of my newfound but temporary role as "international ambassador" at an Indian Baptist church was met at once with the response, "That's what happens when you're not here." The perpetual yet sporadic nature of my presence at Cornerstone was enough reason for the revival planning committee to assign me with ushering duties at revival.

I had only ever been called upon once to actively participate during church services. One time in 2004 I was asked to say the offertory prayer, the prayer offered directly prior to the collection of the Sunday morning offering. I had only ever seen church 'regulars' offer this prayer. Even in services with the lowest turnouts, service duties were shared by a small group of members- but never by a visitor. I considered the possibility that having me say this prayer was some sort of 'test' to see if I was a willing participant or if I was proficient in the language of prayer; in short, my status as a 'believer' was undetermined. I did not understand then how my personal faith would affect my role as a researcher in the church, and so I largely kept it to myself.

My participation in the church had always been as a perpetual visitor with undefined duties in the church. A church member's aunt, herself a member of another Indian Baptist church, once asked me about my role at Cornerstone. It was only after my awkward and vague explanation that she decisively classified me as "one of those uncommitted types." I took no offense to her classification because my presence as a perpetual visitor- someone seemingly unwilling to establish my membership in the church- meant that I was either unsure, uncommitted, or at best, that I evaded my share of responsibilities in the church.

There are a few points from this story worth considering here: first, the role of visitor is multifaceted and encompasses its own set of unique attachments to both the church and the community. A visitor is a somewhat ambiguous position to occupy in the church; your presence is always welcome but it is

never expected, your contributions are expressly appreciated while the work of members often goes unmentioned, and the unknown status of your faith weighs heavily on the minds of others. My research activities did provide some needed clarification about my status in the church, inasmuch as the research explained my perpetual presence at the different churches despite any expressed interest in joining all of these churches. It was important for the churches to account for my unending role as visitor.¹⁰⁸

I do not know why I was incorporated into the revival program that night, but the dynamics at work in this story speak to broader concerns of inclusivity. The church is open to everyone, and perhaps incorporating me into the “international night” program was an expression of that. More likely, however, is that the church seeks faithful and committed members to help grow the church. Placing me in a public role of service reminds me what can happen when I do not maintain regular attendance, but it also encourages me to transition from perpetual visitor to committed member.

Ellis Rollette, the pastor of Earlsboro Indian Mission, explains that committed members are to “be surrendered to the Lord in all things: faithfulness to attend, when there is a need in the family or in the church family, to meet

¹⁰⁸ I once attended a church business meeting and a church member suggested that they consider establishing an “unofficial member” or “temporary member” status for visitors who were committed to the church but were unable or unwilling to join. The proposal came shortly after the church agreed to participate in my research. My position as a perpetual visitor was now complicated by my official presence as researcher. For example, I was invited to attend business meetings and be privy to private financial reports and church records, but I was not recognized as a voting member in the church.

those needs without having to be coerced....” Committed members are essential for church growth. Newly planted Indian churches seek committed members from the surrounding Indian community, but non-native visitors and even “uncommitted types” prove useful in the absence of visitors from the target community.

Restricting Inclusiveness: Personal Callings, Comfort and Revisiting the “White Man’s Religion”

Each church determines the degree of inclusiveness that is appropriate in the context of their local work, and each church has different standards for assessing the potential implications of a highly inclusive approach. SBC Indian churches, by virtue of their adherence to the “Great Commission,” are compelled to participate in outreach to all people. Indian churches whose primary mission is to reach Indian communities, however, find it difficult too maintain a focus that includes everyone. The result is a more refined discourse of inclusivity that pointedly speaks to issues of “Indian to Indian” evangelism.

All the churches in this research seek to “be an outreach to our native community.” I ask the Pastor of Cornerstone if their focus is geared primarily towards the native community. He responds,

I think so. We reach out to everyone; we’re glad to do that. But I heard an old pastor say a long time ago that Indians are going to have to reach Indians. They’re not going to listen to a lot of other people. And I think that’s what our goals, our purpose is. Not limit to just them, but that’s

our main focus. And that's part of the reason [First Baptist] Little Axe and First Indian [Shawnee] wanted to start a church here cause [First Baptist] Little Axe realized they couldn't reach 'em. So they really felt the need for an Indian mission.

This is a great example of how highly inclusive discourses are refined to establish a more limited focus on Indian-to-Indian evangelism. Similarly, a core member of Cornerstone says,

I believe it's still that same goal from the beginning: we need to reach out to those people, we need to reach out to the community. We say "community"- I know it's to everyone but still yet our side goal I guess is Indian people. And that's who the clothing, through food baskets, through- we have only a couple maybe that really go on home visits...It is, [the goal] is still the same to reach out to [the] Shawnee tribe or the Indian people.

The insistence that Indian churches reach out to everyone is well established, but it seems important for church members to contextualize their efforts to limit outreach to native people.

Attempts to refine the highly inclusive discourse of “reaching everyone” into a more restricted discourse of “reaching our people” is an important tactic for Indian churches seeking to establish their presence as a native institution, without abandoning general SBC doctrine. The two types of discourses are not at odds with one another, but there are fundamental reasons for Indian churches to employ a more restricted focus on reaching native peoples. Gary Hawkins, former pastor of First Indian Baptist Shawnee, says, “The gospel is more authentic when it is heard from people who share your own history, language

and culture” (Gill 1997: 91). Interview data is replete with reasons why it is more fruitful to employ native missionaries in native communities, including personal callings, comfort and confronting charges of spreading the “white man’s religion.”

Making it Personal: God’s Calling

The majority of native church members speak of a personal calling to witness to “our own people.” Don Tiger, the original pastor of Cornerstone Indian Baptist, describes his own personal calling to serve God by ministering to his own people:

And I’ll minister to anybody and everybody. But I believe God has called me, in a sense, to really focus upon my own people too. I believe that’s why, still being able to speak my language and read and write it, is a very important factor. You gain- they’re going to be interested. It gets their interest, their confidence, their trust, if you relate to them in their own language.

My first conversation with Brother Don Tiger was at the Muscogee (Creek) Nation Veteran’s Affairs Office in Okmulgee, Oklahoma. His eagerness to answer my questions about Indian missions was matched only by his eagerness to take me through the office’s exhibit honoring Creek veterans. Don Tiger had left Cornerstone some years prior and had since been pastoring newly planted missions in New Mexico, and most recently in Bristow, Oklahoma.

Tiger is Creek and plainly admits his unfamiliarity with the Shawnee community in Little Axe when he answered the call to pastor at Cornerstone:

...God was calling me to the area of ministry, so I surrendered to the ministry at First Indian Shawnee. Short time after that, my family and I moved out to a community called Little Axe. Never knew that community existed till I found myself living in that area!

Tiger acknowledges the distinction between his own Creek background and the Shawnee community of Little Axe, and the role of such distinctions in the church

...because of our diversity of dialects, I can't go to Cornerstone and preach in Creek, cause they're all Shawnees, biggest part of 'em, or Kickapoo and so on. So naturally, I've got to preach in English. But if I go to a Creek church, then I will be expected to at least sing a song or say something in Creek- that's expected. And I think I need to respect that expectation and be able to do it.

The distinction made here between Cornerstone and a “Creek church” speaks to the distinctions between Indian Baptist churches described in chapter one; namely, that native language plays a more central role in the life of older Creek churches than it does in newer Indian churches, such as Cornerstone.¹⁰⁹

Tiger's point about the use of native languages in Indian Baptist churches is bigger than simply a matter of tribal distinctions. The use of native languages in Indian churches, particularly in newer Indian churches with no tribally specific composition, promotes a degree of inclusiveness that is targeted directly at a generalized native population. Tiger insists that Indian Baptist churches,

¹⁰⁹ Tiger says that he cannot expect to preach in the Creek language at Cornerstone because the majority are Shawnee. I do not know if he is referring to the congregation at the time when he served as pastor, or if he is referencing the tribal prevalence in their target community. Cornerstone is situated in Little Axe and the native community there is predominantly Absentee Shawnee, but the tribal composition of Cornerstone is hardly relegated to mostly Shawnees.

presumably those actively seeking to engage local native people, “have to put a flavor of Indianness” into their services. He says of returning to Cornerstone to preach their revival, “...like we did the other night at the revival: we had the Creek sing in Creek. They were speaking Creek, in our language, to make it personal.” The use of the Creek language in a Creek Baptist church serves a fundamentally different role than the use of Creek language in an Indian church whose congregation is composed of many tribes, perhaps with no Creek members at all.

Tiger’s story of using Creek language at Cornerstone’s revival to incite a personal *native* connection exemplifies the use of generalized categories (i.e. “Indian,” “our people”) to establish meaningful connections across distinct communities. Recall Hawkins’ earlier point that, “The gospel is more authentic when it is heard from people who share your own history, language and culture” (Gill 1997: 91). Discourses that establish points of attachment on the basis of simply being “Indian” often do so with a disregard for tribal specificities, multiple histories or nuances of local community life. How personal can attachments with Absentee Shawnees in Little Axe be when they are forged by using Creek language hymns? This is not to say that attachments formed on the basis of being Indian are somehow less meaningful than those formed on the basis of being “Shawnee” or “Creek” or “from Little Axe.”

Attachments formed upon highly generalized categories such as “Indian” rely less on tribal or community specificities and more on broad experiences held to be representative of native community life. Creek hymns, for example, may not represent a shared history with the target Shawnee population, but they absolutely represent an aspect of native life that is meaningful for a diverse population that extends beyond just Creek churches. The use of Creek hymns also represents a collective effort to maintain a tribal language that falls in line with the reputation of “clinging to an older way of life” found among Shawnees in Little Axe.

Creek hymns are particularly meaningful for many native Christians in the areas of Oklahoma in which I worked. Many church members grew up in older Creek churches, or associate such churches with family experiences. Creek hymns, in addition to holding deep historical and personal significance for many native Christians, are also specific cultural expressions that validate the embeddedness of Christianity in native community life.

The significance of being Indian in the context of doing Indian mission work is palpable in as much as everyone with whom I spoke suggested so. The process of refining highly inclusive discourses into a more targeted message for Indian people creates a space for Indian church members to define “Indian to Indian” evangelism on their own terms. The process of generating inclusive discourse that speaks to a common native experience situates native Christians

within the broader native community, and is potentially important for an Indian church looking to become a meaningful native institution in a highly exclusive target community.

Comfort

The topic of comfort is by far the most prominent unsolicited subject throughout the interview data. Every interviewee speaks about the role of comfort in witnessing to Indian people. One reason for the tremendous attention to comfort is the fact that Indian church members, more than any other facet of the broader Baptist community, have the potential to establish points of attachment with ‘lost’ native people on the basis of simply “being Indian.” The previous section explores the role of “being Indian” with regard to forming personal attachments across community boundaries and heeding personal calls to reach “our own people.” Non-Natives, as evidenced at least by non-native members of Indian churches, are capable of establishing attachments and reaching out to native people without themselves being Indian. Native church members, however, speak to conditions of native life that allow for attachments to be formed on the basis of specifically Indian experiences.

Church members reinforce the importance of comfort for potential native congregants, in part, because comfort has figured so prominently in their own

experiences of finding a suitable church home. Consider the following four statements from members of different Indian churches:

I went to a non-Indian church... I went there for about a year...I mean, they love the Lord, they worship the Lord and I was right there involved in things, but deep inside of me I just felt uncomfortable. And I told the pastor and his wife, "It's nothing against you guys, it's just a wonderful church, I know you love the Lord and it's a great place to worship and bring my boys but I just miss my Indian church."

I think for me, it goes back to Indian people. As long as I'm with Indian people we can be a family without my membership being there...When I've attended some of the white churches around Shawnee, it makes them uncomfortable, some of the people, it makes them uncomfortable. It's like they don't know exactly what to say. I think they get so caught up in that that they're not even friendly. They're kind of standoffish. Even when we've been to some of the Baptist Association meetings, we don't have a lot of Indian people that attend those, and I think we need to be more involved- when we go there, they kind of look at us and it's like, "Should I shake their hand?" Like they're afraid of us, almost...."

I went to a church...that was over in Shawnee. They really didn't like us- we wasn't dressed appropriately so they really didn't like us going there. It was kind of one of those "Well, if you're not wearing a suit and tie," you know.

I went to a white church and, um, it was really different for me because they worship different. I mean, we all worship the same God but they just have a different way of worshipping. Like, uh, they're more- (interviewee hesitates) To me, they're more uptight (interviewee laughs). I feel like at the Indian Baptist churches you can be relaxed. You don't have to wear a suit and a tie. You can just come in a shirt and some jeans. Just be comfortable worshipping God.

These passages point to the primacy of comfort for church members who have been raised in Indian churches, but they also suggest the importance of having a specific type of church for Indian people.

Church members who have been raised in church and whose families are also embedded into the life of an Indian church incite a degree of nostalgia when speaking about their comfort in Indian churches. Contemporary Indian Baptist churches, as compared to their non-Indian counterparts, do represent a distinct church *type* with a distinct style of worship and fellowship. Comfort, in this sense, is based partly on these distinctive features but it is also based on the affiliation with something considered “Indian.” Brother Sunny Stewart, the pastor of Cornerstone’s non-Indian sponsoring church, contrasts his own church style to that of some Indian churches:

...You may have heard this time that, “We start on Indian time?” OK, that means if the service is supposed to start at eleven that it may not start till twelve. And see, that wouldn’t work right here! I am strict! ... But with them, it’s different... Not only that but they have a little bit of difference in discipline or church order. I don’t know if you’ve noticed that about the children or not. Kids might even climb out the windows while the service is going on. But that’s their style, they’re used to that.

Stewart’s comments describe a distinctly different style of worship but his comments, in the same way as those native church members’ comments, are based upon a highly generalized set of ideas about being “Indian.” Stewart’s passage evokes references to “Indian time,” a lack of discipline, and leniency in church order. These comments are in line with the perceptions addressed earlier by Victor Cope and yet these are some of the very qualities of Indian churches that provide comfort for many native members. Generalizations about Indian

churches, particularly those that are based on notions of an “Indian culture,” are sweeping and often misunderstood but they are potently meaningful for some.

Kathy Deere, a charter member of Cornerstone Indian Baptist Church, explains the importance of being Indian in witnessing to native people:

When they look at you they say, “Well, you’re the same color as I am and the way you talk- you’re different but then you’re the same”... Maybe that’s what they relate with us cause you know, we don’t start talking about Jesus first thing. We just start giving ‘em our testimony, you know. Telling ‘em about our lives, you know.... Just like when we go to Montana, you know, they just accepted you cause of your skin. You’re the same as them. We didn’t have any problems with them, but I noticed that if another color or another race comes in, they really look at you. They have to test you out, watch you a while to see if you’re going to fit in or if you’re not, you know. I feel that just cause we’re the same color, maybe- And when they find out you’re a different tribe or something, they want to know more about you and [about] your traditions, what you believe, too. It’s kind of hard to [tell them], cause I’ve been Christian so long.

Her statement here is a great example of the discursive attempts to establish intimate points of attachments with diverse peoples on the basis of being Indian. She first speaks about the innate sense of comfort shared between Indian people; natural and instinctive qualities such as skin color and ways of talking create opportunities to witness that are simply unavailable to non-Indian people.

Kathy’s claim, “[We know] where they’re coming from [cause] we come from the same type of life that they have” suggests that being Indian takes precedence over specific community experiences. She presumes that Indians witnessing to other Indians is productive; after all, “You’re different but then

you're the same." Kathy is a transplanted charter member of CIBC. She is originally from Little Axe, her maiden name shares the same name, but she moved away from the community as a young child (her story is told in more depth in the next chapter). Kathy and her husband share a strong commitment to Indian work, and have been involved with several Indian church planting efforts. She and her family moved back to Little Axe as part of their commitment to growing Cornerstone. Kathy's personal testimony about being a transplant in her home community is incredibly poignant and is looked at in more depth in the next chapter.

Kathy's point about Montana is a good example of how generalized categorizations like "being Indian" comes to stand for highly diverse and locally specific experiences. Kathy and I both traveled to Montana as part of Cornerstone's mission trip in 2006 to the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation. There were three non-Indian members on the entire mission team of about fifteen people, including two church members and myself. It is absolutely the case that racial categories and tribal distinctions shaped the interactions we experienced as an "Indian Mission team" working in the communities of Fort Belknap.¹¹⁰ The suggestion is that being Indian creates a type of bond between

¹¹⁰ The Fort Belknap Indian Reservation is home to the Gros Ventre and Assiniboiné tribes. The mission team worked predominantly in the communities of Agency, Rodeo, and Halftown. These areas, known locally as "communities" or "subdivisions," represent different neighborhoods within a central radius. In addition to these communities, we also spent time in Harlem and Havre, the nearest town centers directly outside of the northwest reservation boundaries.

Indian people that is based on the idea of a shared experience; in this case, the shared experience is the keeping of tribal traditions. The expectation of a shared experience is immediately diminished by Kathy's final statement that it is hard to relate on the grounds of tribal traditions because she has "been Christian so long."

Kathy's experience of being "Indian" suggests a marginal relationship to a traditional way of life; her marginal position here is partly a result of specific life circumstances. Her self-proclaimed lack of traditional tribal knowledge speaks to the complex relationship between Christianity and traditional practices, but it also speaks to the limited effectiveness of simply being "Indian" in specific local and historical trajectories. Kathy's story, returned to in more depth in chapter six, is a great example of negotiating one's position on the margins of culture. Kathy finds herself living on the margins of her own community, as well as on the margins of being "Indian," especially when such experiences are so easily linked to notions of culture.

Revisiting the "White Man's Religion": Native Christians Reclaiming Christianity

An earlier part of this chapter puts forth the idea that Christianity for native believers is more than the "white man's religion"; the most highly inclusive discourses within Indian churches suggest that Christianity is for

everyone. Indian-to-Indian evangelism, however, necessitates a more refined sense of inclusiveness; while Christianity is for all people, the rhetoric of Indian-to-Indian evangelism promotes a highly targeted discourse that creates specific points of attachment between Christianity and native people, while also challenging the idea that Christianity is the “white man’s religion.”

It is important for native missionaries working in native communities to obscure the view of Christianity as the “white way”; one way to do this is to incorporate distinctly native cultural expressions into the church.¹¹¹ Recall Don Tiger’s comment about adding “a flavor of Indianness” to Christian forms of worship. Tiger explains, “Church life is good; they (native people) realize that. But they still relate it to the Anglo, the white man...and so you have to put a flavor of Indianness.” Many ethnographic treatments of Native Christianity focus on the “making Indian” of Christianity, and almost exclusively limit this discussion to certain performative forms of cultural expression (Lassiter et al. 2002: 115; Diamond Cavanaugh 1992; Draper 1982; McElwain 1990; McNally 2000; Valentine 1995). The focus on such performative expressions averts

¹¹¹ There are limits to the degree that Southern Baptist Indian churches are willing to add such “Indianness.” This is, in part, a matter of personal decision and accessibility to these cultural forms. It also relates to the official position of the Southern Baptist Convention of which most contemporary Indian Baptist churches are a part. The official SBC position statement on missions reads: “We seek to lift up national leadership in the countries where we serve, and to respect the cultural expressions of their faith – we honor the indigenous principle in missions. We cannot, however, compromise doctrine or give up who we are to win the favor of those we try to reach or those with whom we desire to work. This would rob our efforts of their integrity and life” (www.sbc.net, accessed November 12, 2009).

attention away from other ways that native Christian congregations negotiate the expression of native religious life in unforeseen ways.

Church members directly challenge the perception of Christianity as the “white way” by reinforcing the aspects of Christianity that are literally “not white.” A pastor from an Indian mission explains, “They seem to think that Jesus is this blonde headed, blue eyed guy. That he’s white! But I tell them that he’s Jewish. And his hair was black and his body was tinted just like yours and mine. They don’t understand that.” Explanations like this depict Jesus as distinctly “not white” but as brown “like us,” both in physical appearance and in ethnic background, in an attempt to forge an innate attachment between Christianity and native people.

Consider the following excerpt from an interview with a member of First Indian in Shawnee. The man, whose tribal background is Seminole-Creek and Prairie Band Pottawatomie¹¹², describes a scenario of witnessing to native people who perceive Christianity to be the “white man’s religion”:

...if they don’t slam the door, we start talking. They bring that up, “That’s a white man’s way.” I always say- being a Christian, believing in Jesus Christ- I say, “Jesus was a Jew. He was a brown-skinned person. So it’s really not a white man’s religion.” You might catch their ear now...A lot of Indians, we have a problem with alcohol. I say, “White man brought this alcohol over to us, you know, we started drinking the

¹¹² An interesting portion of this interview came as a result of this man stating he was “Prairie Band Pottawatomie,” an important distinction from the Citizen Band Pottawatomie. His effort to differentiate himself from the Citizen Band created some humorous banter among those present, including jokes about Citizen Band members looking “white” while this man looked more “Kickapoo,” hence more Indian. Such jokes are not uncommon in the areas that I worked, particularly among many Absentee Shawnees who find it particularly important (or humorous) to differentiate between themselves and the Pottawatomie.

alcohol and it messed everything up.” Being a Christian is not a white man’s religion; it’s having faith in Jesus Christ.

This is a particularly interesting discourse about Christianity; first, he is affirming the attachment between Jesus and native people on the basis of similar skin color. He is also taking the opportunity here to challenge the place of alcohol in the lives of native people by prompting the following possibility: how could Christianity be the “white man’s religion” when the white man is responsible for introducing alcohol and its damaging effects to native people? If members of the native population cannot identify with Jesus, and if church members find it difficult to gain traction in the communities, targeted messages that challenge the “whiteness” of the Christian message are important for Indian churches trying to forge relationships in the broader native community.

The idea that Christianity is the “white way” is often affirmed by the idea that genuine native people practice the “old way” or a “traditional way.” Ethnographic attention to such concepts as the “old way” is beyond the goals of this project, but as chapter two suggests, “the old way” and “tradition” has its own set of deeply personal, widely diverse, and historically bounded meanings. Vague notions of the “old way,” however, continue to stand for poignant experiences of being native outside of a specific community context. As such, notions of tradition prove to be powerful means to negate the place of Christianity in native life. Positing Christianity against vague notions of native tradition is common in the academic treatments of Native Christianity, but it is

also a powerful way for some native people to make sense of these two seemingly oppositional categories. Church members offer examples of such oppositional dialogue: “I’m not interested in [Christianity], we’re traditional people. We’ve decided to live our lives traditional way”.¹¹³ This example underscores the oppositional relationship perceived between Christianity and a traditional way of life.

The following example comes from a native pastor who also challenges the idea that native tradition negates the role of Christianity in the lives of native people. Ellis Rollette, pastor of EIBM, is Absentee Shawnee and Sac and Fox. Rollette did not grow up in a Christian household, but says that he grew up “in a different world back then.” He hopes that EIBM will show “unchurched Indians” that Christianity is for everyone. He talks about the role of worship for Indian people:

It’s built into us to worship something. Back in the old days, God gave us this way (traditional way), He gave us the power to heal, knowledge of the plants and things, and how to be one with our environment. And that sustained our people, and helped us to grow because we did like He said to do. But when Jesus came, it was like going from the Old Testament to the New Testament. That blood covenant put the ball back into our court. No longer would He take care of us unless we accepted the fact that His son died for our sins. Once we accepted that, then we were back in oneness with Him.

¹¹³ The church member challenged the traditional values of this person on the basis of their “microwave camp fire” and their “nice car pony.”

I ask him if he believes that native traditions should stop once a person becomes a Christian. He says,

...traditions are fine. You know, we all have traditions. Even the Jewish people had traditions. Even the Pope has a tradition, you know. They're good. But when those traditions start replacing the Godly things in your life- when you use them as an act of worship, then you're saying 'I'm replacing God'. Tradition- I have nothing against the way our people do things. It's the way they've done it for a long, long time...

It seems that Rollette is suggesting that traditions are fine until they enter the realm of religious worship. But as he continues to discuss the nature of traditional ways, Rollette seems to be suggesting something very different.

...I remember so many things about when I was a kid- Even our people that believe in that way now don't hold to it. Because I remember when it was strict: when you didn't run in the dark at a feast, you know. You did not do that. And you were punished severely for doing it. And you didn't eat food outside in the dark... We come from the line of Tecumseh. Tecumseh was my grandfather about six times removed. And so, we were raised strict when I was a kid. You didn't treat old folks the way our kids treat old folks now. When they spoke, you listened. You did not talk back to them. And you cared for them. It was a different world back then. As it is now, our children- even though they say- guys my age that say, "well I believe in the old Indian way" ... they couldn't hold a candle...

This passage seems to suggest less about the relationship between traditions and Christianity, and more about the authority of claiming "traditions" and what that means to being "Indian." Rollette's claim that, "They couldn't hold a candle" speaks to the casualness with which some native people adhere to the traditions that supposedly keep them from becoming Christian. Native people challenge the role of Christianity in their lives on the basis that it is the "white man's way,"

and yet Rollette professes that native traditions in the lives of most native people today are largely an empty opposition to Christianity.

This exchange with Rollette is interesting on many levels. On one hand, he is extracting ‘traditions’ from a specifically native experience into a more universal category held by “all,” including even Jewish people and the Pope. This discursive extraction diminishes the uniqueness of having “traditions,” and discredits the notion that practices are worth maintaining simply because they are long-held. Second, his claims about tribal tradition are authorized and reinforced by his own background and upbringing, personal knowledge and experience; many church members do not have a repertoire of traditional knowledge from which to make such claims.

The pastor’s example of tradition and the previous example of alcohol are both illustrative of the discursive attempts to challenge the notion of Christianity as just the “white man’s way” and, in turn, reclaim Christianity as a way of life that makes the most sense for native people. Native Christians that reclaim Christianity as “our way” do so on the basis of highly essentialized experiences relating to race, substance abuse, and simply being “Indian.” Indian-to-Indian evangelism operates on the presumption that experiences of being “Indian” establish meaningful points of attachment across diverse communities, and they often do.

Discussion: the Rhetoric of Indian-to-Indian Evangelism and the Limits of Inclusiveness

The “Indian-to-Indian” rhetoric employed by native church planters creates a degree of inclusiveness and suggests points of attachment between all Indian people that do not necessarily play out in day-to-day interactions. The “Indian-to-Indian” discourse, pervasive in every personal account collected, creates a common ground for witnessing on the basis of a generalized category, i.e. being “Indian.” The significance of being Indian in the mission field is palpable in as much as everyone I spoke with suggested its importance. The distinctions between native church members and those that they witness to, particularly as most church members are not engaging with members of their own “home” or local communities, emerge as highly consequential factors in the ability to sustain genuine inclusiveness in the social groups that they wish to reach.

The predominant message of newly planted Indian Baptist churches is the accessibility of Jesus Christ to everyone. Mission-minded churches, including the Indian Baptist churches in this research, reinforce discourses of inclusivity in an attempt to establish far-reaching flocks in their target communities. The significance of promoting a message of inclusiveness is threefold: firstly, it is the primary message of the church (and the Christian faith, more broadly); secondly, inclusiveness is important for the churches trying to

reach Indian communities whose general experience with Christian congregations has been conditioned by racial, political, economic and other forms of exclusion; finally, in the absence of local Indian visitors to new Indian churches, inclusivity is important for attracting non-native visitors to the church (a “back up” congregation, so to speak). Despite its importance to new churches, the role of unmediated inclusivity in the church continues to incite contested conversations within Indian Baptist congregations.

It was during a Sunday afternoon Bible study at Cornerstone in 2006 that church members proposed to change the church name from “Cornerstone Indian Baptist Church” to “Cornerstone Baptist Church.” The church had experienced an increase in non-native visitors and new members at that particular time, and some church members felt that changing the name would be a welcoming gesture to them and a more accurate representation of the changing demographics of the church membership. Additionally, members voiced concern that some non-native individuals were unwilling to attend the church because the word “Indian” in the name suggests that they are uninvited.

Churches recognize the importance of non-native and uncommitted visitors to church growth. Churches engage in highly inclusive conversations that promote direct attachments to both of these groups, despite the fact that neither non-native nor uncommitted visitors are part of the original target community. The use of highly inclusive discourse to incorporate diverse peoples

into the church structure fosters church growth, but it also creates a process of congregation construction that reworks the social and cultural boundaries of the local target community. Promoting inclusiveness is a potentially damaging decision for Indian churches hoping to attract members of a culturally exclusive native community.

The native community in Little Axe, for example, has a history of maintaining distinct social and cultural boundaries that establish one's position in the community as either an "insider" or "outsider." Sites of cultural production in Little Axe, namely institutions associated with the practice of Shawnee ceremonial activities, enforce highly exclusive mechanisms for establishing membership in these institutions. A newly planted church that works to create attachments with a variety of community "outsiders" does so at the risk of further marginalizing their own position in the local native community. Here is yet another double-bind for such churches: on one hand, churches do not want to disrupt locally meaningful forms of cultural membership, but on the other hand, churches are not trying to replicate or act according to the rules of cultural production established by any other institution.

Changing the name of Cornerstone Indian Baptist Church to just "Cornerstone Baptist" came up again as an issue of debate in the summer of 2008. A virtual discussion took place among church members, at least those with

access to email. Only six members weighed in on the issue, but a consensus emerged. As one church member wrote,

...I honestly think that Indian Baptist is what makes our church family unique and people, even in Norman, take notice that this church is ministering to the Indian community. Even though we minister to everyone, it shows we don't leave anyone out. I don't think of our church as being only for Indians, but as for anyone. I think we could also get lost as "another Baptist church that's behind the other Baptist church.

Another response put forth the following idea: “We have enough non-Indian churches all around us!! I, also, believe that if we keep our name, the Lord will bless us soon with the Indian community coming to worship and serve God with us!!” These statements from Cornerstone members suggest the importance of limiting highly inclusive discourse in favor of a more targeted one.

The use of highly inclusive discourses situates Indian churches within a broader Baptist tradition, but it does little to foster membership into locally meaningful institutions. Ultimately, Cornerstone did not change their name because it was founded upon a specific burden to reach Indian people. Indian Baptist churches, particularly those that are mission-minded, are built upon the foundation that Indian people should be taking the word of God to other Indian people.

Church members insist that the message of Jesus Christ is for everyone, Indian and non-Indian alike, but the importance of designating a church as an *Indian* Baptist church is beyond measure for some. The limits of inclusiveness point to the need among newly planted Indian congregations to find an

alternative strategy for reaching their target native communities, while also maintaining the integrity of their own sites of cultural production.

Conclusion

Inclusiveness is a risky mode of discourse for newly planted Indian churches struggling to grow in a culturally exclusive community. The risk lies in the church's commitment to a highly inclusive discourse that works to incorporate a population that does not want to be incorporated. Additional risk lies in the strategic use of a more refined discourse of inclusiveness that targets a segment of the population at the expense of another. This chapter explores how church members use discourses of inclusivity to both encourage attendance by the local community, and to forge networks of support outside of the target community in the absence of local interest. Discourses of inclusivity, particularly those that promote the availability of Christianity to everyone, fall neatly in line with the greater Southern Baptist commitment to the Great Commission. The Great Commission instructs all Christians to "go unto all nations" to spread the story of Christ. Discourses of inclusivity ensure the possibility of a far-reaching flock, perhaps far outside of the original target community, but such discourses are expressly limited in their potential to affect the church's position in the local community.

Discourses of inclusivity represent a double bind, of sorts, whereby newly planted Indian churches seek to appeal to their target communities while also fulfilling a much broader obligation outside of the target. I close this chapter with excerpts from a sermon given by Emerson Falls at the 2008 Indian Falls Creek Convention. Falls was elected as President of the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma in 2008, and he is the first Native American to ever be elected to this position¹¹⁴. Falls appointment to this position, and his subsequent reelection in 2009, has opened a viable space for Indian churches to participate in the broader Baptist community. It remains to be seen how Falls' position at the BGCO may affect the broader role of Indian Baptist churches, but his sermon below suggests a vision for Indian churches to be leaders in bringing the world to Christ.

Emerson Falls preaches,

I don't think we know the power that we have! I don't think we realize what we can do in our communities and in our world... You know, Jesus said something and it's fascinated me; I want to talk to him about it someday. One of the things that He said- now listen to this- Do you believe that He said this? Listen: "And greater things shall you do than I did...because I'm going to the Father"¹¹⁵... Do you believe that? Or have we lost our sense of expectancy?

¹¹⁴ The Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma has over 1,700 Baptist churches in its organizations. Falls is the first Native American to ever be elected as President of this organization.

¹¹⁵ Falls is referencing the following Bible verse: "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater *works* than these he will do, because I go to My Father" (John 14:12, NKJV).

Falls' sermon speaks to the possibility that Indian churches, as a single component of the greater Indian Baptist community, carry the potential to bring all people, not just Indian people, to Christ.¹¹⁶



Emerson Falls, Indian Falls Creek 2008. Photo by Mickey Bryant.

Falls' message descends on the ears of both young and elderly people on this night, and perhaps those present will take the message back to their home church as part of a larger effort to imbue all Indian churches with a newfound hope and responsibility. I can only imagine that Falls' aim for this Thursday evening is that the sermon might thrust the work of every Indian church from the dirt roads of Oklahoma onto the global stage, reminding the audience, "God chooses to win the world through us."

Falls' sermon goes on to call Indian churches directly to a larger purpose:

¹¹⁶ His message reflects the proclamation by Henry Blackaby, founder and president of Blackaby Ministries, whereby Native American people would be responsible for bringing the entire nation into revival (see Chapter one). Blackaby's resonates among native Christians, explains Earlsboro Indian Mission pastor Ellis Rolette, because "God has given him this vision. And I can only hope that we'd all catch that vision. It would be so great to have our Indian people lead this country to a new revival, spiritually."

Are you expecting great things from God? Do you really believe that something's going to happen when we leave here? Or have we just lost our expectancy? ...Until we believe and expect great things, we're never going to attempt great things... If you don't believe it, you know what? You're never going to make the sacrifice that it takes to go and pastor one of these fifty-five Indian churches. I don't know about you, but our hearts ought to be broken that our churches are pastorless.

Falls references a presentation made earlier in the week at Indian Falls Creek by Bill Barnett, the Indian Falls Creek Chairman of the Board of Directors and pastor at Indian Nations Baptist Church in Seminole, OK. Barnett reported that forty-nine churches, or one out of every five Indian Baptist churches in Oklahoma, are currently without a pastor.¹¹⁷ This list of churches is startling in print; the list says something of the need for pastors in Indian churches, but it does not necessarily speak to the growth of Indian churches right now. Many pastorless churches, including the final church where I conducted fieldwork, continue to hold regularly scheduled services and function as a church without a

¹¹⁷ Indian Baptist Churches without a pastor at the time of this presentation in August 2008 include: Indian Capital Baptist Church, Faith Indian Baptist Church, Saddle Mountain Indian Baptist Church, Chuculate Baptist Church, New Jordan Baptist Church, Cherry Tree Baptist Church, Sycamore Tree Baptist Church, Tyio Baptist Church of Colcord, First Indian Baptist Church, Indian Baptist Church, Indian Baptist Church-Seiling, Hickory Hill Baptist Church, Pickens Baptist Church, Sandy Baptist Church, Sandy Hill Baptist Church- Stratford, New Jerusalem Baptist Church, Faith Baptist Church, Concord Baptist Church, High Hill Indian Baptist Church, Macedonia Baptist Church, First Indian Baptist Church, New Hope Baptist Church, South Rock Creek Baptist Church, Sandy Creek Indian Baptist Church, Sardis Baptist Church, Only Way Baptist Church, Sand Spring Baptist Church, Cedar Creek Baptist Church, Bethlehem Baptist Church, Little Cussetah Baptist Church, Tookparfka Baptist Church, Vian Creek Baptist Church, West Eufaula Baptist Church, First Indian Baptist Church, Butler Baptist Church, Emmaus Indian Baptist Church, First Indian Baptist Church, Solid Rock Baptist Church, Antioch Baptist Church, Cedar Springs Baptist Church, Bemo Baptist Church, Cedar River Baptist Church, Bethal Indian Baptist Church, Long Prairie Baptist Church, New Green Baptist Church, Nuyaka Baptist Church, Old Clouds Creek Baptist Church of Twin Oaks, Ada First Indian, Sallateeska Baptist, Muskogee 1st Indian (IFC Update Email, August 8, 2008).

permanent pastor.¹¹⁸ The list of churches is, however, of great historical significance if only because it serves as a sobering marker of the ongoing fluctuations in personnel commitments and organizational challenges in many churches.

Falls' proclamation that Native American Christians should be leading the world into revival comes on the heels of this very sobering news about pastorless Indian churches in Oklahoma. I find the bold rhetorical content of Falls' sermon to be particularly interesting for its willingness to profess a childlike optimism; after all, what else besides optimism explains the hopefulness in the idea that Indian churches might bring the world into service for Christ when so many cannot even find pastors to serve in their own churches? The message on this night is delivered to a full auditorium, but what impact does such rhetoric have when services resume in small Indian churches across Oklahoma and hopes of worldly revival are thrust from the pulpit onto nearly empty pews?

My friends in the churches understand such challenges to be evidence that they are doing something right; Satan attempts to defeat those who do the

¹¹⁸ I personally learned a great deal from my time at First Indian Baptist in Shawnee, OK, a church that was pastorless during my time in the church and continues to be as of this writing. So much of my experience at First Indian was shaped by the fact that this church was pastorless at the time. Church services were held as usual, often led by a church member chosen to serve as interim pastor, but it was often the case that visiting pastors and evangelists were invited to lead service. It was during this time that I was fortunate to hear an extensive array of pastors. I found it particularly interesting that this church, which served as a "mother church" for CIBC and EIBM, did not utilize pastoral assistance from either of these two churches during my time visiting at this church. Similarly, I also found it surprising that EIBM did not call upon their "mother church," FIS, at a time when their own building burned to the ground and they were without a facility.

Lord's work. My church friends would also tell me that their reason for optimism and hopefulness is rooted in their faith in the Lord, and they would probably do so with a bit of disappointment that I would ask such an obvious question.

A final segment of Falls' sermon is important to my final point. Falls insists to those present:

...We are going to be a part of that great army. God is going to use us—not just to reach our own people. It's great to start in Jerusalem but it's got to go to Judea, then it's got to go to Samaria, then it's got to go to other parts of the world! Listen to me. God is going to use us to reach people for Jesus Christ all around the world as we surrender to him! I can see it! I believe it with all my heart tonight...He's just waiting on us. Just waiting for us to humble ourselves, pray, seek God's face, turn from our wicked ways. Expect great things from God. Attempt great things for God...

The entire sermon, as this final portion suggests, poignantly captures the double bind in which many Indian churches often find themselves: as Southern Baptist Churches, the congregations with whom I have worked are obligated to “go unto all nations.” Falls plea to start in Jerusalem and go to Judea and then to Samaria is all part of what Southern Baptists deem the “Kingdom Vision.” Indian churches are called to extend themselves to great lengths, and yet many of them struggle to negotiate a commanding presence in their local target communities. It is difficult for newly planted Indian churches, particularly those operating with stagnate core memberships, to see their impact beyond their own local mission field. Some church members find it difficult to even see an impact

within their immediate mission fields. Church members tell me about doors slamming in their faces¹¹⁹, and others request prayers for their lost family members to attend church with them; my interview data is replete with basic but honest observations by church members saying, “They just don’t come.”

Emerson Falls’ message from this 2008 sermon is encouraging for newly planted Indian churches. This message is delivered at a time when individual native Christians are making unprecedented impacts in the broader Baptist community. Falls is elected as the first native president of the BGCO in 2008. At the same time, Falls also helps create and is elected president of the Fellowship of Native American Christians (FONAC), a specialized ministry of the SBC that seeks to bring native concerns to the national stage. The same year the SBC also elects Johnny Hunt, a Lumbee Indian, as president of the entire SBC. Such developments suggest that Indian Baptist leaders are forging public and national platforms on which to situate their ministries. The “double bind,” however, suggests that the issues and solutions discussed on such national platforms have

¹¹⁹ The image of “slamming doors” is a common component of mission workers’ stories about reaching members of their target communities. The image of a door slamming is a poignant representation of the many barriers that native-led mission teams encounter while working in their own communities. I never experienced an actual door slamming while I was working with different congregations. I did participate with members of both Cornerstone and Earlsboro congregations in home visits, neighborhood surveys, and flyer distributions; several times I recall no one answering the door even though the resident was clearly home. The metaphor of the “unanswered door,” perhaps even more than the “slamming door,” more closely reflects the experience had by many native church planters looking to create points of attachment within a target community. The “unanswered door” has additional meaning for Christians who understand that, as many hymns describe, being saved begins with answering Jesus who is knocking at the door of your heart.

yet to speak to the concerns of local Indian churches struggling to reach their targets.

One Sunday afternoon I spoke to two members of EIBM before the evening's church service. Attendance at that service was likely only a handful or two of regulars, as was standard for an evening service at this growing mission. I pose a question to the women about the challenges had by young, newly planted Indian churches. One woman's answer only creates more questions for her:

...Why are we still small? Why can't we get our Indian people? And it's our relatives too, you know. They'll be more comfortable- I think a lot of 'em would be more comfortable in the Indian church, but we can't even get them to come to our own church!

A separate interview with another member from EIBM expresses the same sentiment,

I really always thought that Earlsboro Mission would, you know, mission to people around this area. And that's the way we started out. We wanted to be a mission church to the people in our area. The Native Americans around here, cause there's a whole bunch of tribal members here, different tribes. And we did. We started out going to their homes and inviting them to church and that's what our whole goal was, but uh, then...I just thought- well, you know, we need to invite everybody! Not just the Indians, so we'd just invite people. But I always felt like that's what we were here for. Cause, I believe that some Indian people just won't go to a church, especially if it's a, you know, white church or more of the white people would go to, that they would feel comfortable- But that's not true either cause they don't come here either! (she laughs) A lot of them in this area, because they're not- I can't say they're not saved or not Christians; they just don't come.

The sentiments expressed here reflect one of the most fundamental challenges had by all three churches included in this research.¹²⁰ Church members' observations that they just don't come are sobering, though such observations are likely not limited to Indian churches. Such observations are also not limited to the younger Indian churches in this research. Existing churches, even those with declining memberships, continue to ensure that new churches are being planted in pursuit of reaching "our people."

Indian Baptist congregations are responsive to the news that their churches are pastorless, that the targets seem uninterested, and that there is much more to be done. The ongoing process of planting new Indian churches, particularly as these churches report news about declining local interest and retention rates, incites many questions about the viability of even more new Indian churches. Such questions are reasonable but they are not likely the concerns of those at the core of church planting efforts. Recall the statement of the Cornerstone member, "...as a Christian, it's not about numbers. That's what the world looks at...Like I said, it's not about the numbers. It's not about the numbers."

¹²⁰ First Indian in Shawnee has an extensive history of sponsoring new missions, and is considered to be a fairly established Indian Baptist church. Bill Yardy, church elder, tells me, "[the city of] Shawnee really needs another Indian mission." I ask why First Indian would consider sponsoring a new Indian mission- a second Indian Baptist church in the Shawnee area, and Yardy says without hesitation, "Cause we're not reaching all the Native Americans in Shawnee." A church that sponsors new missions does so at the expense of losing their own members. First Indian in Shawnee is a prime example of this: "See we've been here since 1975 as a church," Yardy explains. He continues, "We've grown but...if we start a mission church some place, we usually lose neighbors cause they'll go and work in the mission. That's good, that's what we should do."

VI Negotiating Exclusivity: Living Against the Margins of Culture

The stone which the builders rejected

Has become the chief cornerstone (Psalm 118:22, New King James Version)

Discourses of inclusivity offer both useful strategies and local challenges for native church planters seeking to forge meaningful attachments within their target communities. Inclusive discourses fall short in some target communities, in part, because highly inclusive efforts to include everyone can disrupt locally meaningful notions of exclusion. Attempts at inclusiveness challenge long held ideas about cultural privacy and membership in local cultural institutions, as well as the standards of cultural production within some communities. While efforts to plant Indian Baptist churches must consider a range of local concerns, churches like Cornerstone Indian Baptist deal with “the problem of tradition” and culture, so to speak, more than churches like First Indian Baptist in Shawnee. Discourses of inclusivity are not particularly useful for negotiating strictly maintained cultural boundaries. Therefore, this chapter explores how discourses of exclusivity provide unexpected strategies for churches struggling to embed themselves as a local institution in the target community.

Discourses of exclusivity are important for positioning the church in a target community of which most church members are not a part. This chapter explores the lives of those who live on of the margins of culture, and ultimately commit their lives to live against it. The story of church planting throughout this

research presumes that, “all people, everywhere, act against their culture” (Dombrowski 2001:10). The native church planters working to grow Cornerstone Indian Baptist Church broadly act against culture in the sense that they position themselves within and against a highly exclusive target community whose notion of culture seemingly leaves little room for Christianity, or Christian *outsiders* more specifically. The church hopes to reach the target by navigating the cultural perimeters of the community, and yet church members profess a faith and message that keeps them on the margins of the target.

The statement that anyone willfully acts against culture incites expectations of an antagonistic display. Visible dissension is commonplace in a world of constant news cycles and virtual connectedness that propels even the most remote political protest, ideological maneuver and threat of religious fervor into our daily consumption. The stories presented in this chapter do not offer grand displays of living uncomfortably within or against culture. Instead, this chapter explores how native church planters employ discourses of exclusivity as mechanisms for staying on the margins of contested cultural spaces. I maintain Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing’s conception of *margin* as:

...an analytic placement that makes evident both the constraining, oppressive quality of cultural exclusion and the creative potential of rearticulating, enlivening, and rearranging the very social categories that peripheralize a group’s existence. [Tsing 1994: 279; see also Tsing 1993]

The notion of *margins* is useful for understanding the possibilities for living outside of one’s culture and, by virtue of occupying the periphery the margin

also says something of the core. The core, for lack of a better term, is the cultural conservatism of the Absentee Shawnees in Little Axe because this is precisely the obstacle around which the church is planted and must negotiate its mission. Recall the statement by one of the original church planters that a great need presented itself in Little Axe because the Absentee Shawnee “were really involved in other things- traditional things, stomp dances and Native American church...things like that.” There are problems with core-periphery models; namely, to say that Indian Baptists are living *on the margins* is to wrongly suggest that native Christians are somehow living on the periphery of an Indian way of life. Instead, I hope to use the notion of margins as a way to understand how some people deliberately position themselves outside of, and sometimes against, the very targets they hope to reach. This chapter considers how discourses of exclusivity work to make sense of the lives that do not fit neatly within the boundaries of the conservatism attached to the Absentee Shawnee community in Little Axe, Oklahoma.

The stated commitment of Cornerstone Indian Baptist Church is to spread the Gospel to the surrounding native community, but it is often the case that church members maintain an ambiguous relationship to the target community and the idea of “culture” that is so tightly linked to this community. Dombrowski writes, “for Native Americans to be against their culture, they must risk losing their claim to being ‘natives’ in ways that matter

immensely” (2001:14). Much of the existing literature on Native Christianity, with its palpable interest in syncretic processes and measures of acculturation, reinforces the idea that native culture looks, functions and has always been a certain way. This limiting sense of native culture is all too often prescribed by non-native expectations and mainstream ideas about what is and is not acceptably “native.”

Newly planted Indian Baptist churches must negotiate the cultural perimeters of their target communities if they are to establish a locally meaningful and stable position in the community. Inclusive discourses, as seen in the previous chapter, forge meaningful relationships both within and outside of target communities. Discourses of inclusivity are important for newly planted churches struggling to gain traction in their target communities because inclusivity allows for connections to be made beyond the local core. A far-reaching flock is important in lieu of local congregants, but highly inclusive discourses that encourage a variety of outsiders into the church have the potential to exacerbate the social and cultural distance between the church and its target (especially if the target community is resistant to outsiders). Additionally, discourses of inclusivity that propel local Indian Baptist efforts onto a broader Baptist platform (such as participation in the BGCO or SBC agendas, or broad-based mission efforts) detract from the purely local focus of a growing church.

What happens when inclusivity is not enough? Inclusive discourses are problematic for churches finding it difficult to establish a meaningful presence in their local target communities. My time in newly planted Indian Baptist churches suggests that church members are fully aware of the limits of inclusivity. Inclusive discourses such as Indian-to-Indian evangelism, for example, falls flat in native communities where social and cultural boundaries are negotiated according to highly nuanced notions of cultural membership. *Membership* here refers to the points of attachment or exclusion forged within and between distinct social groups, sets of relations and cultural perimeters. Church members understand that the social and cultural distance that exists between many Indian churches and their target native communities cannot be mended according to inclusivity alone. Simply put, “being Indian” or claiming that Christianity “is for everyone” is not enough to win all native people to Christ.

It is worth noting that many church members embrace the social and cultural distance between themselves and their target communities, and in some cases, find it advantageous to even overstate this distance. Discourses of exclusivity, or discursive mechanisms that reinforce points of exclusion between the church and its target, offer useful strategies for church members who continue to live both within and against their target communities. Discourses of exclusivity are the central focus in this chapter.

The goals of this chapter are threefold. First, this chapter briefly reviews the various discourses of exclusivity concerning the Little Axe community, specifically those that directly impact the work of the church. These discourses about the community precede the church's presence, but they figure prominently in the church's ability to navigate the community. Twenty years after Cornerstone's inception, the church and many of its members continue God's work from outside of the social and cultural perimeters of the Little Axe community. Therefore, the second goal in this chapter is to consider how Indian Baptist church members create their own discourses of exclusivity to negotiate meaningful positions outside of the cultural perimeters of the target community. Positioning one's self outside of local community boundaries can be the best option for those who are not capable of crossing these boundaries. Finally, this chapter considers why church members maintain discourses of exclusivity, despite the fact that they tend to magnify the social and cultural distance between the church and its intended target.

Establishing Exclusivity: Situating the Church on the Margins of the Community

The Absentee Shawnee community in Little Axe offers a particularly clear example of how discourses of exclusivity can reinforce (and reproduce) the distance that exists between newly planted Indian churches and their targets. The community of Little Axe has a longstanding reputation of cultural conservatism

that works to separate it from other native communities, and more generally, from all outsiders. The reputation for cultural conservatism among the Absentee Shawnee is grounded in the strict maintenance of certain cultural practices and the establishment of distinct social boundaries to ensure the protection of these practices. The concept of cultural conservatism gains most of its prominence in its perpetuation by academics and others outside of the community (see chapter two). Additionally, the classification of cultural conservatism is something that community members profess about themselves, especially in comparison to their native neighbors in Oklahoma.

The reputation for conservatism among the Shawnees in Little Axe is well known among the church planters who came here to plant what is now Cornerstone church. Nearly every church member who came into Little Axe to start the Indian mission, particularly those with no prior experience or relations in the community, had strong ideas about the nature of Little Axe as a culturally conservative native community. Cornerstone's first pastor, Don Tiger, was largely unfamiliar with the community of Little Axe (i.e. "never knew that community existed till I found myself living in that area!"), and yet he professes that the Absentee Shawnee "were really involved in other things- traditional things."

Another church member tells me about her decision to come to Little Axe to help grow Cornerstone. She is Absentee Shawnee from the Shawnee

area, and has gone to Indian churches in the Shawnee and Seminole areas most of her life. I ask her about her familiarity with the Little Axe community upon her decision to come to Cornerstone. She replies:

...uh, I wasn't familiar with Little Axe at all. No. Because when I first went out there they took me the back roads. And I'm like, "I'll never find this place!". I knew nothing about Little Axe. I've only heard...only heard. And see because, we were raised, uh...at Sallateeska. But at Bethel school, there was only like two Indian families. So see, we didn't go to stomp dances- I don't know anything about these things except for what I talk with people about. So, see I'm coming from only raised as a Christian. I don't know that other stuff except for what people has told me.

Notice that the respondent's limited knowledge of the community is based only on what she had heard, and what others had told her. Her unfamiliarity with the community is based on the apparent remoteness of the area ("I'll never find this place") and its reputation as a hub for stomp dances.¹²¹ She easily sets herself apart as an "outsider" on the basis that she is raised as only a Christian, that she never went to stomp dances, and that she was not raised around many Indian people (i.e. her school only had "like two Indian families"). She insists that she was not familiar with Little Axe, but she had heard enough about it to know that her unfamiliarity with 'traditional things' positions her as an outsider.

¹²¹ I often hear other native people describe Little Axe as a hub for stomp dances. While stomp dances are a common activity at the dance grounds in Little Axe, most Absentee Shawnee ceremonial ground participants understand stomp dances to be secondary to more prominent ceremonial activities (such as the Bread Dances, or the War Dance). Stomp dances take place in a highly social atmosphere, and most Shawnee people differentiate the social role of stomp dance in their larger ceremonial complex in contrast to the highly ceremonial role of stomp dance in other Woodland native communities.

It is common for *cultural distance*, the perceived or actual detachment from others on the basis of things classified as cultural, to be reinforced by notions of spatial distance.¹²² Notice how the respondent above describes her first visit to Little Axe as “out there” and on “back roads”; her choice of words are descriptive indicators of both physical and cultural distance. The respondent is not unfamiliar with either “back roads” or communities that are “out there.” She works in other tribal communities and she often visits other Indian churches in rural areas, but she has clearly defined roles in both of these spaces. I have visited some of the areas that she frequents for both work purposes and church visits, and would not hesitate to classify any of them as “out there.” The perceived remoteness of Little Axe, however, is largely based on her understanding of the community as culturally remote and a highly exclusive space, and her role as a church planter does not easily position her within that space.

Bill Yardy, an elderly Creek minister who was also an original member of Cornerstone’s church planting team, says that native communities like Little Axe have a “lot of Indians in them woods down there.” These communities require that, “You have to drive out and beat ‘em out of the bush, cause there’s a

¹²² Spatial distance is important for marking “outsiders,” particularly visitors, in both ceremonial ground and church contexts. Respondents who talk about the “old churches” nearly always comment on the role of spatial positioning to mark the visitors, or sometimes the unrepentant “sinners,” from the church regulars. Ceremonial ground activities also have mechanisms for delineating visitors on the basis of spatial positioning. For example, there is a precise moment in the annual Shawnee War Dance that requires all visitors to physically reposition themselves across the dirt road that separates the dance ground “members” from the “visitors.”

lot of ‘em. You’d be surprised!” Yardy continues, “Like it was over at Little Axe, we had to go in them woods to get ‘em!” Yardy chuckles as he recollects about one particular trip to the “woods” that resulted in an encounter with a very large dog. The dog’s owner told Yardy that the dog did not eat humans, though I am sure that this did little to reassure those hoping to spread the message of Jesus Christ in the seemingly remote Little Axe community.

These descriptions of the community are examples of the tendency among outsiders to perpetuate an idea of Little Axe as markedly separate, remote, and antagonistically opposed to outsiders. It is to be expected that anyone who devotes their life to planting new churches is used to being an “outsider” in the sense that they become involved in communities that are not their own. There are a couple of ways to conceptualize the idea that church planting often takes place outside of one’s own community. Church planting, as discussed in chapter three, often requires the dedication of transplants, or people who uproot and relocate to live their lives in a target community. A more theologically based interpretation suggests that church planting is the confrontation of two distinct communities; most simply, a community of believers and a community of non-believers.

Reality complicates this binary distinction in that the process of native-led church planting in a culturally conservative native community (like Little Axe) involves two distinct communities of believers (they just happen to believe

in different things). The interesting thing about church members' stories about Little Axe is that they do not necessarily frame their own status as "outsiders" in terms of being from another distinct community. Rather, it seems to be that many church members frame their status as "outsiders" on the basis that they specifically stand outside of the traditional way of life that is so vibrant in Little Axe.

Previous chapters mention the "problem of tradition" in as much as church planting teams in Little Axe negotiate the issue of tradition (as opposed to the issue of homelessness, for example) more than Indian churches in other communities. Recall Pastor Bryce Scott's comment that, "Little Axe is- and for a long time has been- a lot of the traditional types of worship, that's what we deal with." The problem of tradition, so to speak, for newly planted Indian churches is that tradition (and everything subsumed within that) comes to stand for all that the church eventually stands against. Let me clarify: the church does not inherently stand against a traditional way of life. Rather, the church struggles to position itself within the social and cultural boundaries that maintain the traditional way of life that is prominent in Little Axe. As a result, the church stands outside of the community and its way of life. Individual stories presented in this chapter suggest that many church members, besides simply standing outside of these cultural boundaries, also develop an antagonistic relationship to

the boundaries that keep them on the “outside.” Therefore, it is the case that some church members also come to stand against culture.

The Congregants

This section outlines three broad types of native congregants in newly planted Indian Baptist churches like Cornerstone. The following types are highly generalized categories and it is rare that any one person fits neatly into any one of these categories. My purpose here is to demonstrate the variable ways that native church members relate to the “things of culture” that many of them come to stand against. These three types generally include: native individuals who never grew up with knowledge of or experiences with native traditional practices, those who continue a longstanding and uninterrupted commitment to a traditional way of life, and those who develop a contentious relationship with a traditional way of life of which they were once an active part. This basic introduction is followed later by more detailed examples of how individual church members relate to the “things of culture,” and how these relationships affect their work as church planters.

The first type of native church congregants is those who never grew up with native traditional practices (and likely grew up only in church) are often quick to regard traditional practices as irrelevant and old-fashioned, and yet many of them profess a genuine interest in casually participating in native

cultural practices as observers. I ask a Shawnee tribal member of Cornerstone, “Have you had any interaction with Shawnee traditions and ceremonies?” She replies:

...You mean like being involved in their dances? Oh, I get invited all the time. Yes! I get invited all the time. (Interviewer: Do you go?) If I don't have something else cause we sing, you know¹²³. Our Saturdays are usually going somewhere to sing. If I do, just like with the Kickapoo tribe- they invited me to come out. And so I was out there all day, all evening- took my mother, “Mrs. Righteous,” and she was like “It's wonderful to see”- Cause see, she's been raised in a Christian home and she's not traditional either! So then here I am, raising my daughter... she's the same way. So all three of us were in awe cause there we were going “Ahh, wow.” I felt so white sitting there! (she laughs) I did. I even wore a bright pink t-shirt! And I had a white ball hat on! I took my hat off and my shirt- I just seemed too...Gosh, I should have worn maybe some jeans and a darker shirt.

I ask the woman about Shawnee ceremonial practices and her closest point of reference, despite the fact that she is Shawnee, is her experience as an observer at a Kickapoo ceremony.¹²⁴ Her experience is marked by a sense of exoticism in the sense that she is “in awe.” Her “outsider” status marked by a feeling of being “so white is confirmed by her awkward and conspicuous presence (as evidenced by the bright pink shirt and white ball cap). Assuming that her experience as an outsider at the ceremonial ground is similar to my own experiences (as an

¹²³ She is referring to her participation in various singing events across the state, including gospel singing on Saturdays, Fourth Sunday sings, and other events that she and her family are asked to perform.

¹²⁴ The Kickapoo maintain an active ceremonial way of life and are often considered to be perhaps the most culturally conservative native community in Oklahoma today, with the Absentee Shawnee following close behind. This casual observation is based on the comparisons that other native people make between themselves and the Kickapoo. Additionally, the reputation for conservatism among the Kickapoo, as with the Absentee Shawnee, is based on a deeply historical effort to maintain separateness, the strict maintenance of a traditional way of life, the prevalence of fluent Kickapoo language speakers, and their general tendency to isolate the intimate portions of community life from outsiders.

outsider, an anthropologist, or perhaps a white person), she says to me, “Probably like you were when you first started going! Weren’t you just like [her facial expression indicates a sense of awe]...?” This type of church congregant is usually eager to applaud and even include some aspects of native cultural expressive features in Indian Baptist worship services. Their willingness to applaud these expressive cultural features in no way signifies a willingness to profess a belief in them or to acknowledge a spiritual truth about them.

One year at Indian Falls Creek a group of about twenty or thirty young Indian men walked to the front of the worship service and began singing a song in a powwow style. A young woman from Cornerstone recalls this moment. She says,

...there was a group up [at Falls Creek] that did sing in their tribal language...this is their ministry. They dance and they sing powwow style, using powwow styles for their ministry. The singers talk about God. They sang a song last year at Falls Creek and it says, “God walk among us” or “Jesus walk with us” and it was beautiful. But I tell you... it was unbelievably wrong to a lot of the elders. They did not like it. It caused a big ruckus. I personally liked it...

The distinction between acceptable and unacceptable native cultural expressive features in a Christian worship service is the degree to which these expressive forms assume religious significance. Singing in a “powwow style” or using a “powwow style” drum, as seen in the above example, is acceptable to the point that it begins to take on spiritual or religious significance.

The same young woman once told me that native people did not need “old ways” anymore because they now have Jesus Christ. Years later, she reiterates this sentiment in an interview with me,

...Some of them do accept Jesus but they also believe in the Native American way, which is- there's spirits, they believe in the ancestors, they have many other gods. The hardest thing is to actually get to the point that there is a God, there is Jesus, and they are the only one. It's not these ancestors, our ancestors, and all these spirits. They're not going to get us to heaven but there's only one God and there's only one Jesus.

This first type of church congregant, who participates in native traditional practices either by invitation or as an isolated experience, explains their participation as only an expression of respect. Acting out of respect is a safer form of participation for church congregants who are not willing to participate, as practitioners of the “old way” believe, to receive a blessing.¹²⁵ There is little danger in dismissing the relevance of a traditional way of life in the contemporary native experience for those who have little to no embeddedness in a traditional way of life (or the communities in which these practices are maintained).

The second type of church congregant is someone who simultaneously continues a longstanding and uninterrupted commitment to a traditional way of life while also being fully committed to church life. There are very few church

¹²⁵ Talking about traditional ways as “heritage” is a safer way for church members to positively acknowledge the role of ceremonies in one’s life without validating the spiritual, supernatural or ‘Creator-given’ nature of these practices.

congregants who manage to maintain uninterrupted commitments to both an active church life and a traditional way of life that includes ceremonial ground activities (such as ceremony participation, social dances, football games, and camp maintenance), family feasts, traditional funerals, and other extensive commitments. Born-again Christians, by virtue of beginning a new life in Christ, are expected to surrender all activities that do not promote complete service to the Lord. The decision to maintain “both ways,” so to speak, is deeply personal and manifests itself differentially among individuals and across communities. The final chapter focuses more fully on this issue.

The final type of congregant is someone who has developed a somewhat contentious relationship to a traditional way of life of which they were once a part. This type exhibits the most conflicted feelings about the role of traditional ways in the life of a born-again Christian. The conflicts had by these congregants are highly variable and are usually based on a myriad of deeply personal and historical reasons. These individuals often maintain imprecise positions in both the church and the socio-cultural networks central to a traditional way of life. It is the person’s imprecise position *relative to* both the church and to the traditional practices (as opposed to the actual act of going to church or practicing traditions) that seem to create the contentious feelings. This type of congregant, as someone who is uncomfortably situated somewhere in between their commitments to the church and the practice of their old ways,

sheds light on the challenges of living on the margins of culture. This type of congregant is the basis of the examples provided in the rest of this chapter.

Again, these congregant types are highly generalized and there are few individuals who fit neatly into any one category. The usefulness of these types is that they underscore the many ways that church congregants relate to the cultural conservatism (both the practices and the boundaries that maintain these practices) of the church's target community. There is nothing inherent about either traditional practices or Christianity that posits them against each other. Rather, this section demonstrates the conditions in which church members construct discourses of exclusivity in order to navigate the cultural boundaries that they have come to stand against.

Cultural practices, and the boundaries that maintain the exclusivity of these practices, are largely out of reach for some church members. The following section explores *how* such practices become out of reach, and how the elusiveness of such practices creates meaningful points of exclusion between church members and the target community. The discourses of exclusivity in this chapter illustrate the processes by which church members find themselves outside of the cultural boundaries of the target community. Their discourses of exclusivity speak to the decisions of those who ultimately opt to live their lives against the target community.

The following sections explore deeply personal stories of individuals living on the margins of culture. These individuals do not lead marginal lives in the sense that they defy societal norms or live as social outcasts. Instead, these are individuals who prioritize their commitment to Christ over a recognizably Shawnee way of life in which they might otherwise participate. Their lack of participation in a Shawnee way of life is not as a result of their decision to accept Christ; indeed, many Shawnee people comfortably participate in both Christian and traditional practices. Likewise, there are also many native people who do not participate in tribally specific cultural practices and are not perceived as living against their culture in the same way that born-again Christians might be.

The church in focus is physically located within the boundaries of the Little Axe community, but the ultimate position of the church rests on its capacity to navigate within and against the cultural perimeters of the target Absentee Shawnee community. Its position against (or outside of) the cultural perimeters of the local community does not prevent individual church members from continually negotiating their positions on the margins vis-à-vis the cultural core of their target. The following section explores the processes by which individual church members come to exist on the margins of ‘culture’, and ultimately, choose to live against it.

Cultural Practices Out of Reach: Two Examples

Kathy and Delana: the Story of a Mother and Daughter

The first person interviewed for this research was a woman named Kathy Deere. Kathy lives in Little Axe, not too far from some of the other Shawnee families I had come to know during my time in the community. I had become comfortable with Kathy and her family over the years that I had been in Little Axe. The Deere family was a core charter family of the mission that became CIBC. The Deere family had been attending First Indian Baptist of Shawnee before they became a part of the mission team in Little Axe. They attended Glorietta Indian Baptist in Oklahoma City before that. Kathy and her family traveled from Shawnee to Little Axe every Sunday and Wednesday for years before they decided to move their home into Little Axe.

Kathy's family is from Little Axe; her maiden name shares the same name. Kathy's position as a local "in," however, is a bit complicated by her upbringing. She explains,

Even though I'm from out here, I really- I left here when I was a child, probably five, six years old. We moved to the city and that's where I was raised. So really, I didn't know too much in this area. I mean... everybody knew me because they remembered me, you know, when I was a kid. But I wasn't raised out here at all.

Her being raised in Oklahoma City, only about thirty miles from Little Axe, was enough for her to feel like an outsider. Her physical distance from the

community of Little Axe is compounded by the fact that Kathy was not regularly exposed to the traditional practices in the community.

Kathy became a Christian at the age of nine. I ask her to tell me about that and she begins,

My dad had left us...he had moved to Texas so it was just my mom and me and my four sisters. I'm the oldest so I had to take care of my little sisters when my mom she worked at night. I remember playing outside somewhere, we was in a park or something, and I remember this older couple come driving by and saw all of us kids playing out. The kids I played with they were all races, you know, in Oklahoma City, southside. They were driving around and they saw me out there playing, and they kind of stopped. They got out, you know, and they approached us. They said, "Would ya'll be interested in coming to Sunday school, to church?" We all looked up and said, "What's that? Sunday school?" (she laughs) That's when I started going to church, cause of this Indian couple. They were Indian.

She continues,

...I started going to church and I started seeing things, cause- you know, at that time, they had Ozzie and Harriet, Father Knows Best- my dad left me. I always thought that was my fault. I don't know, I just thought it was my fault cause he left. It had nothing to do with me, but I felt that, you know. I thought, "He left us, we're supposed to be a family like this." That's what made me sad, I guess. I was sad about that cause I didn't have that kind of family life. When I started going to church, and start learning- I remember my teacher gave me my first Bible...Then I felt, every time the preacher would talk, I begin to feel the tugging in my heart, you know. I couldn't figure out what that was, you know. I remember him saying something about if you feel a tugging in your heart or you feel like, uh...needing to go forward- he said something or other. I said, "That's it!." So that's when I went forward and I accepted Jesus then...

Her mom began attending church some time after Kathy had been going by herself. Kathy's parents never attended church before she began going. Her

mom eventually went with her, but her dad never did. She says of her dad, “He wouldn’t set foot in a church! He was real traditional; he was a real Shawnee!” I ask, “What does that mean?” and she says, “You don’t have nothing to do with white man’s religion. That’s what it was to him.” Her father’s family participates in Shawnee ceremonial practices at the “Old Ground,” one of the ceremonial grounds currently operating in Little Axe. Kathy never became embedded in these practices.

Her decision to follow Christ as a child means, “God’s been first in my life for a long time.” She explains,

...And we’re taught- you serve God first and you try to do what you believe, you’re traditions, the way you were brought up. That’s going to take you away from God, too, so you gotta pick who you want to serve. You wanna do your traditional stuff or you wanna serve God, you know? I’d rather serve God.

Kathy chooses to serve God. Participation in her traditional ways, in some respects, was never a viable choice for her.

The exclusivity that surrounds Absentee Shawnee’s way of life is most often associated with the activities that occur at the ceremonial grounds in Little Axe. Kathy’s father was her primary connection to Shawnee traditional practices, and specifically, to the Old Ground in Little Axe. The physical distance she felt by living in the city grew into a degree of cultural distance when her father left. She says, “I’ll go to their dances...my uncles are all involved in that. I’ll go....but as far as participating...I don’t know how for one

thing cause I've been away for so long!" She figures that she would be really involved at the ceremonial grounds if her father had not left.

She reflects, "I probably would have never been in church. So I think it was a good thing that he left us, cause we never would have been in church." Jesus, according to Kathy, "made me feel secure...He's my security...I feel safe." Cultural practices have largely been out of reach for Kathy. She chose to follow Christ at the expense of knowing her ways, but then again, knowing her ways was never really an option for her.

Delana, one of Kathy's daughters, is a young woman in her twenties when I come to know her at Cornerstone. She uses music as her ministry to others. Delana begins to play the piano at church, and before long she is playing an electric keyboard, guitar, and using screen projectors to introduce contemporary "praise and worship" songs into Cornerstone's morning services. She invites me to her residence in Little Axe for lunch one day after church. She prepares some wild onions and we talk about the relationship between Christianity and native traditions.¹²⁶ Her position is clear at the time: we don't need those old ways anymore because we've got Jesus Christ now.

¹²⁶ Wild onions are a popular food item in many native communities across eastern Oklahoma, and across all of Indian country more generally. These onions are gathered in the early spring, and the ideal harvest time for wild onions lasts only about six weeks. Community groups, families, churches and other social organizations sponsor wild onion dinners in the early spring. These occasions are typically advertised by flyers, church announcements, and word of mouth. Typical preparation of wild onions involves frying them in a skillet with scrambled eggs.

Her personal decision to follow Christ allows her to dismiss the relevance of traditional practices in her own life. Over time, however, I come to understand that the irrelevance of Shawnee practices in her life, like her mother's, is not the result of her decision to follow Christ. Rather, her lack of participation in traditional practices reflects circumstance that makes such practices out of reach for her. She has decided to follow her mother's Christian faith. She also follows her mother's path of cultural distance, but this is much less of a choice.

Delana understands that she lives on the margins of culture with regard to Shawnee cultural practices. Delana is also Ponca on her father's side, and she suggests that she is not embedded in those cultural practices as much as she might wish. She hopes to use her music ministry to both encourage other native youth to follow the Lord, but also to develop a relationship with her culture. She says, "Well, personally, I'm working on a song in my Ponca language." She continues:

...I'm supposed to go up to Ponca City and this Indian man is supposed to teach me some of the songs that he knows that are hymns. My grandma wants me to learn them. I want to learn them to and so-and I'm also writing a song that I want to translate into the Indian language and make that as my praise and worship song. And I want to teach it to other people...singing it in English first and then going into the Ponca language, or just telling them up front, "This is what this means" and sing it...

Delana also expresses in interest in learning Christian hymns in the Shawnee language, particularly given the prevalence of Shawnee speakers over Ponca speakers in the Little Axe area.

I knew from my time in the community, and specifically from my time attending the Shawnee language classes, that there are few contemporary examples of Christian texts or hymns written in the Shawnee language.¹²⁷ I had heard of a Shawnee woman in Little Axe who was believed to possess a number of Christian hymns in the Shawnee language. This woman is said to sing these hymns as part of the worship service at the local Indian Pentecostal church in the area. I made several attempts to reach this woman myself, but went no further than leaving some notes on the door of the Pentecostal church. I had no luck reaching this woman, and Delana did not have much more luck herself.

Delana describes her effort to learn hymns in Shawnee:

...I had no success with that. The lady that I contacted, she told me that she would call me back but she never did. I kind of felt like she didn't want me to learn. That was my impression and then she never called me, so- I asked her, "Can I call you?." "No, I'll call you." She never called me so I figured, well, I guess she doesn't want me to learn Shawnee. I don't know...

Another thing about that is though, people ask me, why would you want to sing it if no one understands you? Cause a lot of language is dying. I don't know a Shawnee. So I'm just kind of beat...

¹²⁷ The most famous examples of Christian texts written in the Shawnee language are the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. These biblical texts were translated into Shawnee by Thomas Wildcat Alford in 1936. Additionally, the first ever newspaper printed in a native language, The Shawnee Sun, was published by missionaries at the Shawnee Methodist Mission in Kansas. The sole remaining copy of this newspaper suggests that it was heavily geared toward delivering a biblical message (see Beatty 2009 for a discussion of its translation; see also McMurtrie 1933).

Delana remembers driving up to the woman's residence and feeling a little uneasy. The woman seemed hesitant to talk to Delana until she knew Delana's name and family associations. Similar to her mother's story, Delana finds it difficult to cross the boundaries of exclusivity in Little Axe despite her family associations. These boundaries are evident to Delana (i.e. "she doesn't want me to learn Shawnee").

Delana's hope to share Christian songs in native language comes from a class she took at a Baptist University. There, she describes, she heard a story of a missionary who adapts songs about the Lord into various native languages. She is excited as she tells me about the reception of Christian songs among these "natives":

...They worship God the way they worship God. It was no different from how they danced or did whatever before. And whenever they did sing those songs in their language the way they worship. After, well they all got saved- and they just started praising God with what they had with their instruments. They would dance, you know, and just praise God how they felt in their heart.

Using native language to praise God is something she hopes to be a part of in some way. She continues:

And that's one thing that I hope to see among out Native American people too, that we can worship God just the same way, the way we would want to worship God, and not make it such a big issue like "No you can't bring the drum into the church."

This last statement about bringing the drum into the church speaks to an incident that apparently happened at Cornerstone Indian Baptist Church some years ago.

I had heard mention of the “incident” on a couple of occasions, but never fully understood the course of events.

Some years prior to my time at Cornerstone there was an incident whereby some individuals brought a drum to worship service. The pastor at the time asked that the drum not be brought into the church. He explains to me that the type of drum they wanted to bring into the church

...was a ceremonial drum. They wanted to bring that drum in and I felt that was going to cross that line...I just told them I'd rather you not do that. And...for me that was one of those lines had we crossed that it would have really been difficult because that's a spiritual thing. Even though, to a lot of us, it was just a drum, it's also very spiritual too.

This incident highlights a central issue in native-led Baptist missionary work: at issue is the degree to which native cultural practices, beliefs, and instruments of expressive culture are integrated into Christian (specifically, Baptist) worship services. This discussion, in turn, speaks to broader issues of native Christian identity and the relationship between contemporary Christian practices and the expression of a native identity. Delana participates in this broader discussion (discussed further in the next chapter), and struggles with the notion that some Indian Christians reject the use of “native culture” in church services.

Delana offers a historical perspective on the issue and responds directly to those who criticize the use of native language (and specifically, powwow style singing) to sing Christian hymns:

...some of our people have been beaten. They were made to go to the white school. They were made to not speak their language. They were

made to accept the white peoples' ways in everything, the white peoples' gods, the way they worshipped, the way they work in this world, everything. We were made to be quiet, forced to be quiet. Forced to speak English, forced to accept the white people's culture and so we have to leave behind a lot of the Native American ways...Some of the people who've accepted that maybe think it's a disgrace to [sing this way].

The absolute refusal, or even the suggestion, by some that certain native cultural practices do not belong in Christian worship services is a discussion beyond the scope of this chapter. Those who understand the meaningfulness of native cultural practices within their cultural context express wariness about their inclusion in Christian worship services. Ultimately, Delana concedes, "Maybe they know something that I don't know."

Delana is optimistic about her life's dedication to serving the Lord. She ends our interview with a profound statement about her desire for other native people:

...It's always been my dream to go and make a difference as a Native American Christian woman and going to another reservation and doing what I can and making a difference among their tribal people. And I believe how we're going to reach the Native American people is through the youth.

Delana left her home in Tecumseh, Oklahoma the next day to be a part of Cornerstone's second mission trip to the Fort Belknap Reservation in Montana. Some time later, Delana left Cornerstone to begin a new Indian church in Oklahoma City.

Delana and Kathy are both examples of Indian Christian women who are committed to reaching other Indian people for the Lord. Kathy has transplanted herself and her family into a community where she once had a chance to belong. Delana never had that place in the community and so her position and her desire to witness to Indian people stands more firmly outside of the boundaries of Little Axe.

Kathy was shut out of participation in Shawnee traditional practices because, as she explains, her father left. His leaving prompts a sense of loss regarding ceremonial practices, but it also prompts the opportunity for Kathy and her children to have a relationship with Christ. Delana, on the other hand, grew up in a household that came to prioritize service to the Lord over specific cultural practices (i.e. ceremonial dances, stomp dances, and powwows). Delana's relationship with Christ is not burdened by the contentious associations with cultural exclusion in the way that her mother's is. The loss of culture, so to speak, for Kathy's family creates the opportunity for an everlasting gain. Christ makes life on the margins of culture worth living, particularly for those who never could stand inside the margins of culture.

Lu and Adam: The Story of a Mother and Son

I drove about fifteen miles east of Little Axe to the town of Tecumseh to interview a church member named Lu. The rural roads that come out of Little

Axe turn into more clearly defined neighborhood sections as you head into Tecumseh. I circle around a neighborhood with tightly situated homes and cars lining the curbs. I do not go to Tecumseh often, except perhaps on my way to Earlsboro Indian Mission or on the occasional trip to the tribal complex. Lu is standing in her front yard waving me over. She was afraid I would not find it.

It is a scorching hot July day. We sit in her living room and talk over the noise of a fan and the television. I sit on a sofa and Lu sits across the room in a chair. She speaks softly and seems to gaze out the window throughout most of our interview. I ask her to speak about her experience at Cornerstone Indian Baptist Church. She begins her story talking about some Christian women at her place of employment. One woman, a member of Cornerstone, always invited Lu to church. She tells me:

I was working with this lady. I was in the world real bad, real bad.¹²⁸ I would hear them talk and I was just so tired of it cause, you know- before I came to know Christ, I was real hard, I was real mean...I was working with them and I'd hear them talking all the time. And they always seem happy and...I'd think, "Oh, how peaceful that is. I wish I could feel that way." Cause all I ever feel was anger- anger and loneliness. I guess, mainly, I just...wanted to know what that would feel like.

"Scared," "confused," "mean," "hateful," "doing it all," "the worst kind of person"; her statements that start with "I was..." are completed with words that

¹²⁸ It is common to hear Christians refer to an unbeliever or someone who has strayed from the Lord as living "in the world." Born- again Christians seek to live their lives in such a way that distinguishes their lives from the unsaved, so that they are "of this world, but not in the world." This come from the biblical scripture in John 17:16, "They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world" (NKJV).

describe a person I do not know. She fills her story with descriptions of herself as “hard” or “mean,” but the woman I am interviewing has a generous spirit and contagious laugh.

Born-again Christians often frame the story of their lives in such a way that details the “before” and “after” of one’s decision to follow Christ.¹²⁹ She describes her life before coming to know the Lord:

No matter what kind of person I was, and you could think of the worst kind of person there was; I was that. But the Lord had his arms open. I realized that’s the kind of people He’s looking for, lost people. People with no hope, with no peace, no joy, people that’s scared, lonely, hungry, angry- and I was all of that.

The decision to surrender one’s life to Jesus ensures a new life, both on earth and for eternity. Lu has a new life now and perhaps that is why she feels comfortable telling me about her past.

She is tremendously candid with me and tells me about great sorrow, anger and love in her life. I must have been in “interview mode” during our actual interview, because it is not until I go back to read the transcripts that I find it very difficult to get through her entire interview in a single sitting. The story that follows is that of a woman who exists on the margins of culture. The commitment she makes as an adult to follow Christ encourages her to live against her former way of life that, in some ways, always kept her on the margins.

¹²⁹ See Stromberg (1993) for an anthropological study of Christian conversion narrative performance.

Lu's life of challenges begins before she is two years old when her mother died. She recalls her earliest years:

My brother was about five, I was about three, my other brother was about one and my dad- My dad used to be a truck driver, so he'd be gone weeks at a time. A lot of times, it was just the three of us there. We didn't have nothing to eat. I had literally nothing to eat and we'd go pick pecans just to have something to eat. I remember it being cold and my brother said, "Well, you and [your brother] get in this gunny sack." He covered us up while he picked pecans so we had something to eat, you know. So I know somebody prayed for us back then.

Lu and her brothers are passed around to various relatives, and ultimately they are split up among different households. Lu says,

I lived with my Kickapoo relatives down to Sac and Fox relatives, you know, and I moved to Shawnee. But everywhere I went... I wasn't considered that tribe. When I was with the Kickapoos: "Oh, that's that Shawnee girl." All over like that.

Lu's residence with different relatives meant that she was also moving across communities. The difficulties inherent in moving within and across Shawnee and Kickapoo communities, both of which are considered to be highly exclusive, creates long term implications for Lu's sense of belonging in either.

She lived in a number of different households as a child. She came to experience distinctly "native" ways of life in these households, including participation in Shawnee and Kickapoo ceremonial activities, traditional funeral practices, and the use of native language in the household. She remembers making trips as a child to "Old Mexico" to visit relatives among the Mexican Kickapoo. She says, "I always wanted to be a part of our traditional stuff...our

Kickapoo dances. And then when I came to live...here [in Little Axe], I would always dance in the Bread Dances.” Lu’s proficiency with Kickapoo language was useful for participation in both Kickapoo and Shawnee ceremonial life, but questions she had about Shawnee practices were left unanswered. “When we grew up,” she explains, “you just do what you’re told and don’t ask questions.” She feels that her questions about “cultural things” emerged, in part, as a result of her transitions between multiple communities. Her tendency to move back and forth meant that her embeddedness in both Shawnee and Kickapoo community life was partial.

Lu’s somewhat marginal presence in local community life created points of separation between herself and a native way of life from which she felt rejected. She now fills this space with service to the Lord. Her attraction to church service, she says, began in response to living as an “outsider” in both the Shawnee and Kickapoo communities that she struggled to be a part:

If I talked my native tongue, one or the other, real fluently...I might not feel this way. I want to know what I’m doing. I want to know who I’m serving. I want to know why I’m doing that. I’ve always been that way. My brother used to get mad at me: “You know, curiosity killed the cat!.” I’d tell him, “Well, I ain’t no cat!.” I want to know why.

Her brother’s caution against curiosity speaks to the cultural conservatism discussed in earlier chapters. The mechanisms used to maintain the privacy of cultural practices from outsiders extends to even those living within the community. Lu’s background as someone who drifted between communities as a

child suggests that the distinction between “insider/outsider” is complex. Her sporadic presence in the community and her partial understandings of Shawnee practices mark Lu as an outsider, or at least a marginal member, within her own community.

Abusive and neglectful environments mar her early life, yet Lu maintains that every household that she was put had someone in it that loved the Lord. She never felt fully a part of any one tribal tradition but, along the way, select relatives showed her the importance of prayer and the capacity to love others. She praises God for every challenge in her life and says, “God has showed me more times than I can name what he can do, what he has done.” As an adult she prays,

Lord, I know you made me an Indian. I know you made me and I miss our ways. But I want to serve you. You’ve helped me out, pulled me out of things that I can’t even begin to imagine.

Lu occupies the margins of culture in the sense that she was unable to fully establish membership, or meaningful attachments, in local native cultural institutions. The margins are a space “where people live their lives and try to get by” (Sa’ar 1998: 223). She finds solace knowing that one day the Lord will reveal why she was not taught some things “for one reason or another.” She knows it is part of God’s plan.

Lu existed on the margins of culture long before coming to know the Lord. Lu found it difficult as a child and young adult to negotiate the social and

cultural boundaries that maintain the traditional native institutions active in the Little Axe community. She easily became engrossed in a way of life that encompassed drinking and hard times, and yet she struggled to fully be a part of the “cultural” components of native life that she desired. She remembers staying with her father as a child, “They had stomp dances and ‘49’s in our yard... they’d be passed out all over the place.” She says, “If that’s being Indian, I don’t want that for my kids.” Lu chose to raise her kids on the same margins that she found herself.

Lu’s son, Adam, spoke to me some time after I had interviewed his mother. Adam, a man in his thirties, speaks quickly and without much reservation. His candor on most subjects matches that of his mother, but his words seem burdened with a heaviness that cannot be found in his mother’s voice.

He and I spoke at length about how he became a part of Cornerstone Indian Baptist church. His story begins with the story of two brothers who invited him to Cornerstone. Adam agreed to go cause “it was something new.” He is proud to say that he was “one of the first ones” at Cornerstone, and remembers the early days of the mission when it shared space with First Baptist Church in Little Axe.

The anger that once plagued his mother finds its way into the stories that Adam tells about himself and his past. It is hard to tell how much the anger

lingers in his life, but Adam seems to channel any relics of it in ways that positively affect others. He relates to those that live a hard life; this becomes evident to me during Cornerstone's mission trip to the Fort Belknap Reservation as I see the subtle ways he affects the lives of a few troubled teenagers. His own life is marred with experiences of prison and personal loss, and he feels that his calling is to be a witness to those who others are "afraid to go to" on the streets.

Cornerstone, explains Adam, "was the first place I was really accepted." He participates in both church and tribal ceremonies until he is a teenager. He decides to "quit doing my ways" because, like his mother, he was unable to fully establish membership or meaningful points of inclusion in local cultural institutions. His story is one of a young man who challenges the boundaries of exclusivity that maintain a way of life that he ultimately chooses to quit. Adam's story sheds light on the process whereby generations within families come to live on the margins of culture.

I ask Adam to explain his decision to "quit his ways" as a teenager. The "ways" that Adam refers to are the Shawnee ceremonial ground activities practiced at the North Ground in Little Axe. Adam says, "it was kind of hard because my mom- she's Shawnee but she's Kickapoo...so I know little more ways about the Kickapoo ways than I do the Shawnee ways. I get them crossed and mixed up from time to time." He says he abandoned the "traditional" way of life "when they considered my mom a black sheep or...[they] didn't want her

around or something like that.” His decision to “quit” his ways responds directly to his family’s struggle to secure a position in the local social and cultural structure in the community.

Extended excerpts from Adam’s interview underscore the exclusion he feels from the “culture” of his community. He describes his contested participation in Shawnee traditional practices:

...I guess you could kind of say when we’d go around [the ceremonial ground] and stuff, they wanted us to be there but they didn’t want to show us stuff... in my mind, it bothered ‘em when I questioned ‘em, asking ‘em why they do it this way. And when I know it to be right to be this way. And they’d get shocked at why I knew what I knew. They kind of brushed us off. So after that, I shaved my head! I said, “Well, if you don’t accept me or my family, I guess I’m not Indian enough for you.” I had long hair about to my, almost to my waist and I shaved it all off. I was about 14, I would say. Just shaved my head...

...My grandpa, my elders from what I remember and everything...they always told me, “Know what you say” and if someone says- Like, I won’t sing a native song if I don’t know what it means. And if someone’s singing a song can’t tell me what it means, what they’re singing, I won’t sing it cause I don’t want to be singing something somewhere else or anywhere not know what it is, could be disrespecting somebody, could be worshipping the devil for all I know!

...[People at the ceremonial grounds] treated me better than they did my brother. Cause my brother’s half white. He’s mixed so they treated him bad. And they always came to me before him, and then, you know I’ve always been family oriented and I know that’s not the way. I’ve always included him with me and they didn’t really like that.

...I knew about [traditional ways], but I knew that was a dead end street. [The ceremonial leaders] didn’t want to teach the people that wanted to learn; they wanted to try and force it on people that would do it and now they’re not even there now and so. It’s like they’re all kind of running around trying to figure out who can do- like everyone’s running around trying to pass on their language and stuff when, if they- the elders or trying to be in the position they was a long time ago, they could

just pass it along to everyone instead of being so selective, but- like I said, that's just people in general.

Adam does not dismiss the importance of native cultural practices. He even suggests that native pastors and church members should make an effort to include traditional people and their practices in the church. He says,

Indians don't want to come to church and hear being dogged about their Indian ways and stuff. They don't like that kind of disrespect, and I don't disrespect 'em that way either. You know, I think these people- these pastors that are Indians, if they are Indian, they would know their ways, they would know that in that tipi they're worshipping God and stuff- they're not heathen ways. These are the ways God gave us. The ones that are really doing it are worshipping God and believing in God, even the son Jesus now, so they don't want to come to hear getting their ways dogged and stuff.

Adam states the importance of knowing Indian ways, but suggests that there are only some who are “really doing” the traditional practices given to native people by God. Adam defends native traditional practices, specifically Native American Church (i.e. tipi), despite his own decision to “quit my ways.” These and previous comments suggest that Adam’s disagreement is not with the practices themselves, but the selective mechanisms that work to exclude others from them. Adam is quick to dismiss the politics and procedures of ceremonial ground life, in part, because these are the things that worked to exclude him and his family from participation.

Adam and his family experience exclusion from Shawnee cultural institutions, such as dance ground activities, on the basis of local attitudes

surrounding race, language, residence and family structure. His comments about his brother being mistreated at the dance grounds because of his racially mixed background are reminiscent of something his mother recalls,

I feel like I couldn't be a total part of it... As I had my kids, they were called "white kids" and stuff like that. (Interviewer: Why?) I don't know. It hurt my feelings, and- You know, here I am, coming over here and helping and I want my kids to learn. And they called 'em "white kids" and that hurt my feelings, so I just quit going. I quit going totally. So we was kind of lost for quite a while.

The comments here suggest that local attitudes about race are strict to the degree that ceremonial participation by the racial "other" (anyone seen as not fully Shawnee) is prohibited. This is certainly not the case at either of the ceremonial grounds that I came to visit. Local attitudes about race are complex. Calling someone "white" in this case is a pointed statement about that person's position outside of the local native community, more than it is a statement about racial background.

Adam feels excluded from his culture on the basis that he is not taught certain ceremonial things and his family is discouraged from ceremonial participation. His inability to fluently speak Shawnee (and thus understand the content of the practices) intensifies the cultural distance that he experiences in Little Axe. Adam further excludes himself with his decision to quit his ways because he does not "chase after something that doesn't want me to." Adam uses discourses of exclusivity that explain his exclusion from community life by others, and validate his decision to maintain this exclusion.

Adam's most permanent discourse of exclusivity is a tattoo that spans the length of his right forearm. Appearing on his forearm in black stylized script is a deliberate distortion of the phrase "Li Si Wi Nwi," or "among the Shawnee." He explains that he has never fully felt among the Shawnee, and that he "messed up the tattoo on purpose because we wasn't considered members of the tribe."

Adam and his brother were two of four Shawnee men who got the same tattoo. The partiality of the tattooed phrase says everything that I cannot about living on the margins of culture.

Discussion: The Constraints of Exclusion

The stories in this chapter suggest that native church members who live on the margins of native culture do so because these cultural practices are "out of reach" for them, often long before they ever come to know the Lord. Scenes from everyday life do not always make evident the ways that individuals are living on the margins of culture. The specific work of native church planting in a culturally conservative community like Little Axe, however, puts into focus the moments when those "with culture" and those for whom culture is "out of reach" seem to stand against each other.

The Little Axe area continues to be shaped by systemic processes that have long impacted the social and cultural boundaries of this community, including accelerated economic development, municipal expansion, changing

demographics, and others. The native community in Little Axe has long had a reputation for being culturally exclusive, or set apart in some way on the basis of their adherence to a traditional way of life. This reputation persists in spite of systemic changes to local community life, in part, because social and cultural boundaries that ensure exclusivity remain in place.

While Shawnee traditional ways are not the only sites of cultural production for Little Axe residents, the exclusivity of these practices ensures that only a limited number of people have access to these sites of cultural production. Some of the mechanisms that work to keep this exclusivity in tact include: the regulation of ceremonial dance ground participation, limiting access to guarded cultural knowledge, favoring local social and family networks over individuals, reinforcing the role of Shawnee language proficiency in cultural practices, promoting ideologies of cultural preservation that make language and song acquisition difficult ‘outsiders’, and couching cultural difference in racial terms.

I offer this short anecdote to reiterate the relationship between social attachments and cultural boundaries. The Shawnee language instructor who taught classes in Little Axe also taught language classes for a short time in the Shawnee area beginning in 2006. A tribal member came to one of these Shawnee area classes and she asks the instructor about getting an Indian name. A child

usually receives an Indian name as an infant.¹³⁰ This woman, however, says that she was never given an Indian name because she grew up in a Christian church. This statement presumes an inherent conflict with a traditional Shawnee way of life (i.e. getting an Indian name) and her own upbringing in church. It is unlikely that she was denied a Shawnee name (by those who conduct naming ceremonies, at least) because of her attendance in church. Rather, her upbringing in the church simply reflects a way of life for her own family that is outside of traditional activities. She seemed genuinely interested in learning about Shawnee traditions. Her interest in obtaining a Shawnee name as an adult and her newfound interest in learning about Shawnee language, coupled by the fact that her learning about naming and language was situated in a classroom setting in Shawnee, says that her disconnection from a traditional way of life has more to do with the absence of locally meaningful social and cultural attachments than it does with a church upbringing.

The nature of community life everywhere is complex. Structural changes within a community, as well as the exclusive measures taken to deal with these changes, deeply affect the ability of some people to live within their

¹³⁰ A child is provided a Shawnee name shortly after birth by a designated name-giver, usually a local elder or an elderly family member. The child becomes a member of the name group, or clan, that is appropriate to the newly given name. For example, if the given name refers to feathers then it is necessarily of the Turkey name group. If the name refers to water, it is of the Turtle group (Voegelin and Voegelin 1935: 623). The naming ceremony is still in practice today among the Absentee Shawnees. Upon being named, babies wear a strand of white seed beads around their necks, usually until the child removes the beads accidentally. The use of name groups distinguishes individuals in ceremonial, political and social realms. Names are meant to “sound good,” and they provide a form of cohesion among members of the same name group.

own culture. Structural changes do not determine local modes of cultural production, nor are local mechanisms for limiting cultural production only responses to structural changes. Individuals weigh the possibilities for living within or against ones culture, and some choose to the latter. In short, the very process of maintaining an exclusive community ensures that some people are simply left out and some opt to stay out.

Newly planted Indian Baptist churches foster entire communities (i.e. congregations) of native people who share experiences of living on the margins. This is not to say that membership in a Christian church marginalizes native people, or that church membership is only for the marginal. Instead, I hope to say something of the inherent dynamic in the relationship between a newly planted church and its target community. The stories of Kathy and Lu and their children underscore how generations of some native families become embedded on the margins of their own culture. Their stories are particularly poignant because both Kathy and Lu are Absentee Shawnee tribal members who are working as church planters in an Absentee Shawnee community of which they were both once a part.

It is not the status of “church member” that brings individuals to stand on the margins of their own culture. What is left when “church member” is not part of the equation? The cynic sees an evangelical church as targeting and luring marginal people into church life on promises of feeling part of a family,

community, or even a ritual setting that they otherwise would be fulfilling at the dance grounds. Perhaps church members would not disagree with this claim. These stories suggest that the process of coming to stand on the margins of culture is embedded in a local history that extends beyond the individual and rarely has to do with going to church.

Individuals like Kathy and Lu live on the margins of culture long before turning their lives over to Christ. The same structural processes that maintain cultural exclusivity in Little Axe are the very processes that keep cultural practices “out of reach” for some. Living *on* or *against* the margins of culture is not always a bad thing. I hope to underscore that marginality here is not a condition or type of a person; instead, I use marginality to denote the process of positioning oneself in relation to sites of cultural production and the local mechanisms used to maintain access to these sites. Keep in mind that, as scholar bell hooks reminds us, marginality is not always something that, “one wishes to lose- to give up or surrender as part of moving to the center- but rather a site of stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one’s capacities to resist’ and create alternative ways of living” (hooks 1991 in Pillai 1996: 11). My goal is not to understand why people come to exist on the margins. Instead, I hope this chapter shows how people make sense of their lives on the margins and, for some, why it is that they stay.

Locating the Margin

I use the concept of margins throughout this chapter to underscore the relative social and cultural distance that creates points of exclusion between native church planters and their target communities. Native church members are not marginal in the sense that they are social deviants or outcasts. Rather, church members occupy a peripheral position in relation to the cultural perimeters of their target community. Margins denote a space whereby cultural practices become out of reach for some.

Amalia Sa'ar's work considers "how people live and try to get by on the margins" and finds that those living on the margins "are not being reproduced according to the model envisioned by the center" (1998:223). Sa'ar's observation is important because it challenges the unilateral connectedness of the core-periphery model, and suggests that the daily lives of those living on the margins are not subject to the ideas and ideals of those who make up the core.

Renato Rosaldo's notion of "cultural zones" is an example of an approach that challenges the presumably stable positions of the "core/center" and "periphery/margins" models. "Our everyday lives are crisscrossed by border zones, pockets, and eruptions of all kinds," says Rosaldo. He continues, "such borderlands should be regarded not as analytically empty transitional zones but as sites of creative cultural production that require investigation" (Rosaldo 1993: 207-208). Rosaldo's interest in these sites of cultural "eruptions" derives from

the misconception that zones of “cultural invisibility” are “inhabited by ‘people without culture’” (1988:78). Rosaldo’s interest in zones of cultural invisibility, or places of the “undocumented,” is relevant here because scholars tend to relegate the lives of native Christians into this space. The notion of the culturally invisible is also useful as a supplement to the notion of sites of cultural production, suggesting that such sites are both power-laden and inaccessible to some.

It is important to account for those for whom sites of cultural production are not easily accessible simply because inaccessibility is defined according to power relations and social positions. Consider the frequency with which native Christians are assumed by some scholars to be “heretical, inauthentic, assimilated, and uncommitted” (Treat 1996:9). Such characterizations of native Christians are no doubt couched in terms of culture; i.e. culture heretics, culturally inauthentic, culturally assimilated, and culturally uncommitted. The culturally uncommitted individual is of little interest to most anthropologists and yet examples like Kathy and Lu remind us that those living against the margins of their culture maintain highly nuanced relationships with culture. Those for whom culture has become inaccessible continue to participate, if only marginally, in contests over cultural production. Discourses of exclusivity reveal that culture is intensely present in the lives of even those who appear to be living without it or living against it.

Kathy and Lu produce discourses of exclusivity that decisively identify points of exclusion whereby they come to exist on the margins of their culture. Growing up “in town” and being abandoned by the one family member who could most easily expose her to Shawnee traditional practices are the initial points of exclusion for Kathy. Bouncing between different tribal communities, lacking full integration into any one local family structure, and experiencing repeated abuses are the primary points at which Lu is excluded from locally defined sites of cultural production. Kathy’s daughter and Lu’s son are further excluded from cultural activities, and they each produce discourses of exclusivity that more firmly separate them from the cultural institutions of which they were never fully a part.

Dombrowski writes in *Against Culture*,

...those from whom cultural reproduction exacts a particularly high price- those whose participation is the most tenuous, and so who are forced to absorb the greatest emotional, economic, or political risk is participating in culture- are apt to be the ones most frequently confronted by their own anticultural feelings. [2001:183]

Recall church member Adam’s earlier statement about his relationship to his “old ways.” He says that he does not “chase after something that doesn’t want me to.” His “anticultural” feelings, as Dombrowski would call them, reflect a decisive positioning by Adam to live not just on the margins of his culture, but ultimately to live against his culture. The costs of participation in local cultural institutions for some individuals are tremendous. These costs include exclusion

due to lack of language proficiency, exclusion on racial terms, and exclusion from local family structures. The costs of living against culture, for some, are entirely more manageable than the impossibility of living within culture. Church membership does not force people like Adam to live against his culture, but it makes life on the margins of culture manageable.

It is important to recognize the potential implications of saying that church members often exist on the ‘margins of culture’. We too easily equate ‘culture’ with ‘being Indian’ and so statements like ‘existing on the margins of culture’ imply that these individuals are somehow on the margins of Indian life or, perhaps more damaging, that they are somehow not fully “Indian.” Those interviewed for this research make clear that their positions in the church or their decisions to serve the Lord do not impede on their capacity to be Indian. Respondents recognize the multitude of ways to be Indian; participating in ceremonial life is one way, and attending an Indian Baptist church is another way.

Maintaining Exclusion

Discourses of exclusivity are useful for individuals who come to live against the margins of their culture. These discourses establish meaningful social positions for individuals who struggle to establish points of attachments in a local community. It is interesting that many of the same individuals who

struggle to be part of their home communities then commit their lives to these very communities as church planters. Members of Cornerstone Indian Baptist Church, including both those who are and who are not from the target community, use discourses of exclusivity to establish points of separation between the church and the target.

Discourses of exclusivity offer unique insights into the variety of ways that the notion of culture figures in to the daily work of native-led church planting. Michael McNally's book *Ojibwe Singers: Hymns, Grief, and a Native Culture in Motion* considers how native-led Christian communities "rework the resources of native tradition to meet concrete needs of changing times" (2000: 173). The book focuses on contemporary relevance of hymn singing at Ojibwe funeral wakes. Hymn singing at the wakes acts as more than timeless vestiges of an Anishinaabe past. Traditional forms of hymn singing, notwithstanding the revived nature of this practice, act as vehicles for negotiating "on the cultural field what would contribute to survival on the social field" (2000: 6). McNally's argument for the use of cultural forms as a negotiating tool for community survival is interesting in the context of native-led church planting. How does culture function at the local level of native-led church planting? What is the usefulness of culture as a means for easing transitions between distinct native communities? Consider the frequency with which generalized notions of culture are used historically as a conversion tactic. How might such strategies be

different in the context of native-led mission work? Simply, is culture enough to establish points of attachment between the church and its target?

Examples of native-led church planting suggest that the use of culture as a tactic for negotiating wider issues is contingent on intensely local and historical circumstances. A more detailed example of EIBM, for example, might suggest that culture is ineffective in establishing points of attachment with the local target, in part, because the target native community is an impermanent population based in a relatively new Indian housing edition that does not represent any one cultural tradition. A more detailed look at First Indian Baptist Church in Shawnee might reveal culture as a more viable tactic for reaching their target community simply because the variety of native cultural backgrounds represented in their congregation might be useful for reaching the diversity of native people living in the Shawnee area.

The case of CIBC is interesting if only because the very practices that might encourage wider participation from their target community (i.e. native language use, outdoor camps, traditional funeral protocol, or recognition of food or behavioral restrictions) are largely out of reach for some church members. The following questions remain: Why do church members maintain discursive separation from the very communities that they hope to bring to Christ? Why does the church not make a more deliberate effort to incorporate locally meaningful forms of worship? Why do church members produce discourses of

exclusivity that firmly situate them apart from the cultural traditions of the people they hope to reach?

The church has grown firmly against the specific cultural institutions that are meaningful to the local native community, and yet the church's marginal position in the community is precisely what ensures its continuation.

Reinforcing the divisive perimeters that exist between groups, even if it means standing against the sites of cultural production that are meaningful to each other, is important for the church's growth. The Indian Baptist church is marginal in relation to the culturally conservative community of Little Axe, but there are a few key factors that sustain its presence in the community. First, the church maintains fairly low visibility in the local native community. Second, the church does not engage in active opposition to the community's ceremonial practices. Finally, church members maintain appropriate levels of distance away from these practices, as well as appropriate levels of participation when attending any local cultural activities.

The church and its members respect the local cultural boundaries and they negotiate them according to locally prescribed measures. It is not unusual, for example, for church members to attend traditional Shawnee funerals or even the ceremonial dances. Apart from the few church members who are also community members and who maintain participation in their local cultural practices, most church members are confined to the role of "visitor" when

making a presence at such local cultural activities. This separation is important for both the church and the local community.

The advantage for newly planted churches in maintaining an “us/them” relationship with their target community is that it adheres to the social and cultural perimeters established by the community. It has historically been important for the Absentee Shawnee community in Little Axe to establish definite and impenetrable boundaries between themselves and any “outsiders” in proximity. One certainty of native community life in Oklahoma, both in historical and contemporary settings, is that outsiders have long infiltrated native communities. Cornerstone Indian Baptist Church, by virtue of being an outside institution attempting to establish itself within the boundaries of an exclusive community, is susceptible to the same impenetrable boundaries afforded to historically non-native institutions passing through the Little Axe community.

Conclusion

The story of church planting brings into focus the complex relationships between the church and its target. The intimate and personal stories of native-led church planting make clear the contested cultural spaces that situate some people on the margins of culture, and others against culture. The stories of Kathy and Lu, and even Delana and Adam, remind us that the distance between church planters and their targets is as deeply personal as the distance between a child

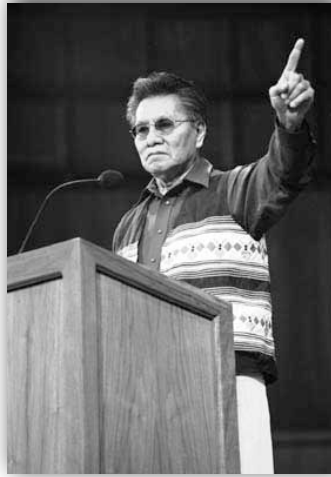
and their father, a young woman and an abusive past, an Indian youth and the native tongue they never knew, or a young Shawnee man who is denied the traditions of his mother on the grounds that he is “white.”

Church planters like those who grew Cornerstone from a mission into a church, by virtue of initiating a new institution in a community not fully their own, challenge local boundaries of exclusivity and cultural membership. The nature of church planting is such that the target community is markedly distinct from the community of believers who work to spread the Gospel. The process of church planting makes these distinctions evident but it is often the case that the things that separate individuals from their own community have been in place long before the planting of any church.

Cornerstone Indian Baptist Church hosted a revival in November of 2006. Revivals are a time for church members to be renewed in spirit, revived in faith, and fed the word of God. One church member explains to me that revival is

...a time of reviving yourself, your soul. You get so caught up in the world of things that you almost forget God, you know, you kind of get lax. And I think revival kind of builds you up and reminds you why you're serving the Lord. So that's what it does for me...

Bill Barnett, the Indian Falls Creek Chairman of the Board of Directors and pastor at Indian Nations Baptist Church in Seminole, Oklahoma, delivered the message at this particularly revival.



Pastor Bill Barnett (Photo Courtesy of *Shawnee News Star*)

Brother Bill encourages Cornerstone members to embrace the exclusion that they feel from the community, and more generally, from the world. He reminds every one of a lesson that Jesus taught when choosing his disciples. Jesus told his disciples, “If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you” (John 15:19, NKJV). Barnett relates this to the struggles of bringing the word of God to native communities. He says (paraphrasing), “We are not supposed to blend in the community. We are supposed to stand out. It is supposed to be evident that you are a child of God.” Church planters expect to live separate from the world and some expect to live against culture. Those who commit their lives to church planting would have it no other way.

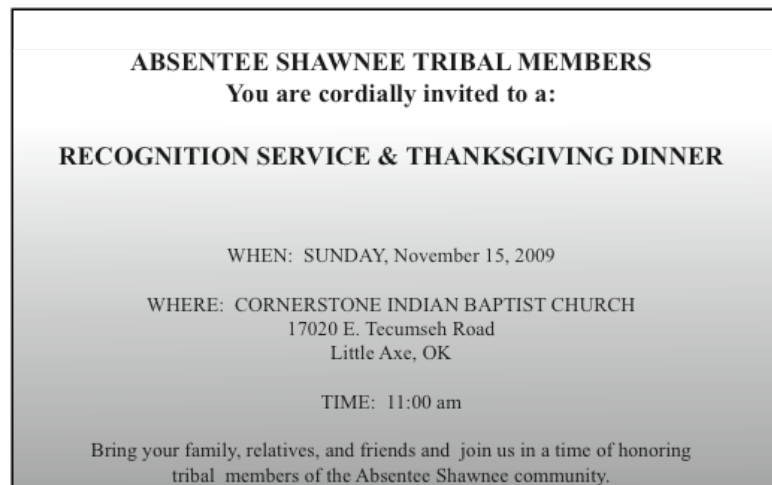
VII. Sowing Seeds: Growing the Body of Christ a Handful at a Time

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ (Ephesians 2:13, New King James Version)

Cornerstone Indian Baptist Church hosted its 3rd Annual Absentee Shawnee Tribe (AST) Appreciation Day on November 15, 2009. The AST Appreciation Day consists of a special worship service held in the church, followed by a fellowship meal for all in attendance. This special recognition service is an opportunity for members of the native-led Baptist church to acknowledge both the Absentee Shawnee members of the church and the larger Absentee

Shawnee community in which the church is situated. AST Day is a new practice within the Indian Baptist

church, but it speaks to ongoing efforts by the church to reach out to members of the surrounding community of Little Axe. The native-led Baptist church planted itself in the community of Little Axe in 1989. There remains a great awareness



among church members that this native-led Baptist church continues to exist on the margins of its target community.

Bryce Scott, the current pastor of Cornerstone, told me in 2007 that the surrounding Shawnee community “won’t even come in the church and experience it.” He said, “They’re probably not going to come in the church. We’re going to have to go to them. And kind of intermingle, and share the Gospel with them, and just let them know that we care.” Going into a community proves difficult for church members who do not fit neatly within the highly exclusive conditions of membership that exist in a community like Little Axe. Nearly two years after this statement by Pastor Scott, he addresses a group of Absentee Shawnee community members who came into the church.

The pastor of CIBC approached the pulpit during this AST Appreciation service in much the same way he would during any other Sunday morning service. In lieu of the standard Sunday morning sermon, however, the pastor opted instead to use his time at the pulpit to address the Absentee Shawnee visitors in attendance on this day. There were only a handful of Absentee Shawnee visitors from the surrounding community, markedly fewer than in years past, but the pastor addressed these few individuals as if he were speaking to the entire community. He spoke of genuine appreciation for the Absentee Shawnee people in Little Axe, and he noted the many blessings that came to both the church and himself as a result of their interactions with the local

Shawnee people. The pastor, whose tribal background is Chickasaw and Choctaw, expressed thankfulness that he and his family had been encouraged to attend the ceremonial dances of the local Absentee Shawnee.

Powerful words of acknowledgement emerged as the pastor spoke about the marginal position of the church in the community. The pastor pointed out the relative newness of the church, a point that somehow intended to amplify the ‘outside’ nature of the church in this highly traditional community. The church’s presence had been tolerated within the boundaries of a community that otherwise had its own set of established religious practices. The pastor expressed great appreciation for the community’s tolerance and hopefulness that the church and the community, in all of its traditionalism, might continue to support one another. Never before this particular service had I heard the pastor publicly acknowledge the marginal position of the church in their target community.

Recall Don Tiger’s comment about the initial reception of Cornerstone in the community: “they came one at a time.” Twenty years after Cornerstone’s inception, on this particular day of community recognition, members of the Little Axe community came into the church about “a handful at a time.” I had been asked to attend church on this day of recognition and offer a personal testimony about my time in the Absentee Shawnee community of Little Axe. The event program seemed to include mostly Shawnee church members, a point that may or may not have been planned. I was the only non-Indian listed on the

official event program, but it is possible that my participation at this event represented a number of things. First, I had spent many years working as an anthropologist in the community of Little Axe, thus I understood the difficulties of working within the boundaries of a community whose members might prefer that you not be there. Furthermore, I gave up my usual seat in church that day to sit in the company of both my adoptive family and the man who would become my husband, all of whom are Absentee Shawnee and each representing unlikely visitors from the target community.

Perhaps my invitation to speak on this day was to show my appreciation to the community of Little Axe; after all, this community became the unintended target for both the church and for my own research. I conveyed my words to the visitors as much as I could in Shawnee, and then I spoke the rest in English. I also think, however, that my role on this day was to demonstrate to the church the importance of seeing the possibilities. As stated earlier, the challenges had by a new Indian church trying to reach a culturally conservative community are easy for anyone to recognize; the possibilities are a bit harder to see. I came to understand through the process of both doing research and forging attachments in my own “target community,” so to speak, that there are deeply personal and historical relationships at stake for those doing the work of native-led church planting.

The pews of Cornerstone may never again see that handful of people, but their presence in the church for that one day marks an important point of growth for this Indian Baptist church. Planting a church within the physical boundaries of a community does not ensure that it becomes part of the fabric of that community. The presence of community members in the church on this day, despite the individual reasons why each were there, signals the possibility that this church is forging some kind of position, albeit still on the margins, in their target community.

At the center of this research is the story of a native-led team of missionaries looking to plant an Indian Baptist church in the center of a culturally conservative native community. The notion of cultural conservatism is an abstract way to characterize an entire community, but this abstract notion emerges over time as a powerful discourse. The discourse of cultural conservatism gains potency as community members, community outsiders, and church members alike reaffirm its meaningfulness in the daily lives of those who subscribe to it. Community members subscribe to it because it stands for a way of life that is meaningful and capable of defining them as unique. Church members subscribe to it in as much as it provides a foundation of need on which to build the church.

The discourse of cultural conservatism informs the maintenance of a specific way of life, but it also informs the criteria by which some are included

in this way of life and some are not. The discourse of cultural conservatism, however essentializing, acts as a powerful discourse that both defines community boundaries and differentially situates people within and against these boundaries. These boundaries are important in the process of church planting, particularly for church planters from outside of the community, because they act as measures for monitoring membership in local institutions.

The reputation for cultural conservatism linked to the church's target community is based on the commitment to a way of life aimed at the maintenance of certain cultural practices. The maintenance of these cultural practices, the most prominent of which is ceremonial ground activities, provides the primary sites for contemporary Shawnee cultural production. These sites of cultural production come to stand for Little Axe's cultural conservatism, but these sites also define the *space of possibles* that provide "all that one must have...in order to be in the game" (Bourdieu 1993: 176). The game of cultural production, so to speak, is a power-laden endeavor that is monitored according to intensely local rules of inclusion and exclusion. The highly exclusive nature of Shawnee cultural production ensures that participation in local sites of such production is rendered inaccessible for many.

The Inaccessibility of Cultural Production

Church planters who came into the community of Little Axe to begin a new Indian work thrust themselves into the game of cultural production in as much as the church's presence challenged the local boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. Original church planters insist that a great need presented itself in Little Axe because the local native community was into "other things." The need for an Indian church suggests, inadvertently or otherwise, that current forms of religious practice do not fully address the spiritual needs of this community. The most predominant form of religious practice in the native community of Little Axe is the set of activities subsumed within the greater Shawnee ceremonial complex. These highly exclusive activities are also the primary sites of Shawnee cultural production, thus ensuring that any challenges to the religious content of community life are also challenges to the predominant cultural content of community life.

The story of native-led church planting as told from the perspectives of those who commit their lives to spreading the Word of God reveals how the potential for contests over cultural membership is largely diffused by church members' willingness to live on the margins of culture. I maintain Tsing's conception of *margin* as:

...An analytic placement that makes evident both the constraining, oppressive quality of cultural exclusion and the creative potential of rearticulating, enlivening, and rearranging the very social categories that peripheralize a group's existence. [Tsing 1994: 279]

Local measures to determine participation in cultural production within the community of Little Axe are highly exclusive. Locally defined measures determine the process of deciding who does and does not have stakes in cultural production, where and when cultural production takes place, and what local institutions are sanctioned as valid sites of cultural production. The church and its membership exist on the margins of this process. The reasons for this are multifaceted, but the simplest reason is that this specific church is both a new and an outside institution. Additionally, many church members have come to stand on the margins of this community long before being a part of this church. The exclusivity that works to marginalize new and outside institutions extends also to individuals who, for one reason or another, do not fit neatly within the local game of cultural production.

The contests over culture and cultural membership that emerge in the context of native-led church planting make clear what is truly at stake for those church members living on the margins of their target communities. The dichotomy between church life and traditional life is not really that problematic for many native people; indeed, many native people seamlessly incorporate both traditional and Christian ways into their daily lives. Others simply devote their lives to one or the other, without feeling a sense of loss at the absence of either a Christian or traditional native component. It is important, however, for native

church planters looking to establish a new Indian work in a culturally conservative community like Little Axe to stand out in relief from their target communities. There is a biblical passage that reads, “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16, NKJV). Church members’ narratives work to distinguish them from the world, including their target community, so to show others what God has done in their lives.

Church members construct narratives about the glorious works that God has done in their lives. Narratives of inclusivity and exclusivity allow church members to navigate within and against the powerful discourse of cultural conservatism of which most of them are not fully a part. These narratives add depth to the larger Native Christian experience that is so often invalidated, by academics and others, as neither genuinely native nor genuinely Christian. Anthropological interest in these narratives is immeasurably important for native church planters who struggle to get their stories heard beyond nearly empty pews. These stories, of native people who situate themselves on the margins of native culture, also have implications for understanding why anyone chooses to invest in seemingly undesirable, ineffective or marginal subject positions.

Investing in a Marginal Subject Position

The process of native-led church planting reveals purposeful and reflective ways that church members discursively “work out” the subject positions that they come to occupy. Native church planters commit their lives to leading others to Christ, and yet sometimes this process requires living against the target and living on the margins of native culture. Earlier chapters explore discourses of inclusivity and exclusivity as discursive spaces whereby native church members make sense of the variable subject positions into which they are hailed in the process of church planting.

On the one hand, discourses of inclusivity foster specific sets of social relations that are widely accessible to most church members. These social relations establish points of attachment between church members and potential networks of support on the basis of both generalized representations of native life (i.e. Indian to Indian evangelism) and a Christian doctrine that welcomes all peoples. Social relations forged upon inclusivity are far-reaching, but many of these relations and encompassing social networks can be ineffective with regard to the church’s *local* goals. Inclusivity has the potential to challenge local ideas about cultural privacy and membership, particularly in communities where these things are maintained in exclusive terms. Additionally, in highly conservative communities like Little Axe, inclusivity disregards local standards of cultural

production in lieu of maintaining relations within the broader Baptist community.

The Indian Baptist church is part of the evangelical Christian tradition, and this is important for understanding why inclusivity is not effective in the Little Axe community. Zehner's study of Thai Christianity describes evangelical Christianity as something that, "stands apart as a transcultural collectivity, being not fully owned by any particular cultural setting or subgroup, while being somewhat adapted to each of the settings in which it finds itself" (2005: 588). The transcultural, collective nature of Evangelical Christianity suggests a fundamental reason that the Indian Baptist church has difficulty initiating a sense of ownership among the greater Absentee Shawnee community in Little Axe. The church is competing with a set of established religious practices understood by local practitioners to be given directly to Shawnee people. While church members understand the love of Christ to be for everyone, traditional Shawnee religious practices are, in ideology and in practice, highly exclusive and fully belonging to specific groups.¹³¹

Inclusivity is important to newly planted Indian churches, but it is it discourses of exclusivity that seems to offer church members a way to engage

¹³¹ Shawnee ceremonial traditions are believed to belong to Shawnee people. The responsibility for carrying on these practices, and thus "carrying the world along" (Selstad 1986), rests with Shawnee people—not Yuchis, Creeks, Kickapoos, or any other tribes. A closer examination of traditional Shawnee ceremonial life would reveal complexities within this specific site of cultural production whereby full participation in ceremonial practices is also limited, in some respects, even within the greater Absentee Shawnee community. This is important here only because participation in certain ceremonial practices is not permitted on the basis of being a non-Christian, but according to a wider set of rules of inclusion and exclusion.

with the community while also maintaining local standards of cultural membership. Church members simultaneously employ discourses of inclusivity and exclusivity, but these distinct discourses work for church members in very different ways. While discourses of inclusivity work to create attachments with the target community and beyond, discourses of exclusivity situate church members markedly outside of the local community. Individual church members who have been excluded, or simply left out, of the game of cultural production over time use discourses of exclusivity to reinforce their marginal position in the community.

Reinforcing the social and cultural distance between themselves and the target community is important for a couple of reasons. First, it is important that newly planted churches make sense of the challenges that keep them from forging meaningful attachments in the target community. Discourses of exclusivity articulate the historical and social conditions that render attachments inaccessible for a church that is relatively new and an outside institution. More important, perhaps, is that church members use discourses of exclusivity to reinforce the same measures of cultural membership that also situate many of them on the margins of the target. It is common for those living on the margins to use discourses of exclusivity to criticize the community that has excluded them over time, but even such criticism reaffirms these community boundaries.

Living on the margins of the target, and sometimes against it, ensures that the church and its membership is tolerated and given the opportunity to grow.

Both discourses of inclusivity and exclusivity engage with broader discourses about native culture. The notion of culture in inclusive discourses is one that is situated within a highly generalized native experience, whereas the notion of culture in discourses of exclusivity is one that is highly monitored and largely inaccessible to those outside of the local target community. Church members engage with these conflicting ideas about native culture, in part, because doing so sustains the work of church planting at both the local level and beyond. These ideas about culture, as either highly generalized social relations (accessible) or highly monitored social relations (inaccessible), also further solidify the subject positions that many church members become a part in the process of church planting.

Relevant here is Stuart Hall's discussion of interpellation, or the hailing of social subjects into direct engagement with specific discourses. Hall's discussion of interpellation derives from a critical engagement with Althusser's use of the same term.¹³² While Althusser defines interpellation as the process whereby individuals are summoned as subjects by ideology¹³³ into given

¹³² Althusser's notion of interpellation is conditioned by his own engagement with Lacan's psychoanalytic *identification*, but there are also undertones of Marx's *false consciousness* in this conception.

¹³³ Ideology, here, is the means by which individuals are given a "mystified representation of this social system in order to keep them in their 'place' in the system of class exploitation...The opacity of the social structure necessarily renders *mythic* that representation of the world which is indispensable for social cohesion" (Althusser 1990: 28-9).

positions in the social structure, Hall's discussion of subject positions underscores the process whereby social subjects *invest in* and articulate their subject positions.

Subjects are created through discourses and practices that attempt to 'interpellate,' speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses (Hall 1996: 5). The moment that the subject invests in their social positions and, in turn, forms a point of attachment to the discourses that hailed them into position, is the point at which the subject is fully realized. Hall uses the term suture, or meeting point, to refer to the point at which "discourses and practices which attempt to...hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses" converge with the processes which "construct us as subjects...which can be 'spoken'" (Hall 1996: 5-6). In other words, Hall's interest in subject positions is not necessarily how they are formed, but how subjectivities are negotiated once the subject position is occupied.

The meaningfulness of subject positions is worked out through a process of articulation. Articulation, according to Hall, is

....a connection or link which is not necessarily given in all cases, as a law or a fact of life, but which requires particular conditions of existence to appear at all, which has to be positively sustained by specific processes, which is not 'eternal' but has constantly to be renewed, which can under some circumstances disappear or be overthrown, leading to the old linkages being dissolved and new connections-rearticulations- being forged. [1985: 113]

Articulation is an important concept here because it recognizes that social subjects are capable of negotiating their own positions in the social structure. Consider the stories of Adam and Lu in the previous chapter. Both of them invest in the position of marginal subject, in as much as it provides a discursive space from which to criticize the fields of production that ultimately exclude them from participation in the social structure. Similarly, Kathy's story also suggests that positions of marginality can be rearticulated to account for the possibilities that such positions offer; she would have never come to know Jesus Christ had she not come to stand on the margins of native culture.

Church members discursively occupy their marginal subject positions only temporarily, perhaps only long enough to recount how far they have come since being saved. Importantly, the act of investing in marginal subjectivities allows church members to establish a new site of cultural production, one that is centered on their personal relationship to Christ and not the inaccessible sites of culture. For just a moment, at the point of "suture," personal testimonies verge away from the tireless attempts to reach a target and turn toward the personal fulfillment that comes from being a Believer. Church members articulate new meanings for their subject positions; it is as a Christian subject, not a marginal subject, that native church planters offer a new discourse about what it means to be "native." Articulating their subject positions puts church members in a new game of cultural production.

This notion of articulation departs from Althusser's thoughts on interpellation in important ways. Althusser's position on the subject is that, "No human, i.e. social individual, can be the agent of a practice if he does not have the *form of a subject*" (Althusser 1976: 95). The understanding here is that the subject is only capable of acting within the subject position created for them by the dominant ideology. Stuart Hall, however, shows how subject positions become sanctioned only once the subject invests in those positions and realizes them through articulation. The point at which the subject position is realized by the subject's willingness to invest in it is only a temporary moment of attachment; it is at these points of attachment that identities are negotiated (Hall 1996:6).

Hall's theory of articulation is useful for thinking about the contested nature of social positions in native-led church planting, and it speaks to the broader role for power in the study of the native Christian experience. Michael Harkin's *The Heiltsuks: Dialogues of Culture and History on the Northwest Coast* is an example of a study of the native Christian experience that is attentive to both dialogic modes of meaning making and the complexities of power

structures relative to native realities.¹³⁴ Harkin, using an approach that blends both Bakhtin¹³⁵ and Foucault¹³⁶, explores the period of Methodist missions among the Heiltsuks as the “reorientation of the subject within a new social and meaningful context” (1997: 123). Harkins’ work is important for underscoring the power-laden nature of subject making. Future studies of native Christian experiences, and ethnographic treatments of Christianity more broadly, need to make clear that powerful discursive formations are not entirely constitutive of one’s social reality. Rather, social subjects negotiate meaningful (and often ephemeral) attachments to the subject positions that they come to occupy.

Discussion

Scholars posit the question: “Can one be Christian and Indian simultaneously in contemporary society?” (Kidwell et al. 2001: 10). This question is poignant both as a line of scholarly inquiry and as a point of personal reflection for many. The inherent problem with such questions, however, is the

¹³⁴ While not of direct consequence for either my own work or for Harkin’s work, a comparison of Stuart Hall’s formulation of the discursive subject with that of Foucault’s discussion of discursive subject positions is important to theoretical discussions of power. Stuart Hall focuses on the agentive and complicated ways in which subjects come to occupy subject positions. Foucault (in his earlier works) does not account for moments when “the insertion of individuals into the subject positions” is “interrupted, resisted, prevented, or negotiated; an overestimation of the efficacy of disciplinary power and to an impoverished understanding of the individual which cannot account for experiences that fall outside the realm of the ‘docile’ body” (McNay 1994). As Foucault becomes increasingly seminal to discussions of power and the subject, it is critical that the work of Stuart Hall be placed alongside these discussions.

¹³⁵ Per Bakhtin, Harkin employs a dialogic perspective that “accepts the collective and symbolic qualities of culture as a given, but...places them in a framework of communication” (1997: vii).

¹³⁶ Harkin (via Foucault) considers how the control of time and space, the production of docile bodies, and a new architecture of evangelism made possible the articulation of public and private spaces as units of observation and control (1997: 122).

tendency to evoke simplistic ideas about what it means to be either Christian or Indian, much less what it means to simultaneously be both. Critics of Native Christianity challenge the idea that Indian people can seamlessly live as either Indian or Christian without somehow denigrating the purity of either. Many native Christians might subscribe to this idea, particularly as native Christians possess highly differential ideas about the appropriateness of fusing recognizably “native” cultural components into Christian worship practices.¹³⁷

Questions about the place of recognizably “native culture” in Christian practices, or the commitment of native Christians to a distinctly “cultural” way of life, are meaningful questions. It is easy to understand how the notion of Native Christianity is problematic for those who posit Native Christianity as merely “aggregations of unlikes” that are “held together more by circumstance than by their own cultural logic and thus prove unstable and of only fleeting consequence” (McNally 2000: 844). McNally suggests, “Native Christianity winds up being understood largely as an outcome of history, rather than as a part and parcel of it” (2000: 843). The view of Native Christianity as nothing more than the product of historical conflict (Harkin 1997: 98) overlooks the purposeful and meaningful ways that some native people live today as both natives and Christians.

¹³⁷ Zehner’s study of Evangelical Christianity in Thailand points out that many who subscribe to Christian doctrines view syncretism, or the blending of multiple religious traditions, as “processes of mixing that pose dangers to the Christian tradition” (Zehner 2005: 592).

The idea that native Christians are not living up to their full cultural potential as natives rests on the notion of the “fetishized Indian” who is able to “throw off Christianity and all the vestiges of modern civilization” (Swanson 1997: 58). No one asks, “Can one be a college graduate and Indian simultaneously in contemporary society.” The difference between being a Christian and a college graduate is one of religious foundations, but the idea is that both experiences represent a set of challenges, contradictions and betrayals specific to native people. While this is may be true for some, the problem is that such questions are framed within the context of “contemporary society”; situating any particular “problem” of native life in juxtaposition to contemporary society suggests that native people are innately bound to a cultured past.

No one lives seamlessly within culture, and those who subscribe to the Christian faith understand that they will not always live seamlessly within religion. An ethnography of native-led church planting reorients the question away from “Is a Native Christianity possible?” toward questions about how native people negotiate contested cultural spaces within their own communities, and how powerful discourses lead some native people to live within or even against their culture. Stories of native-led church planting inherently deal with the interaction between native church members and members of the target communities. The story that is not fully told here is one of the interactions between Indian Baptists and the greater Baptist community.

There are at least two, though probably many more, conversations taking place right now *among* Indian Baptists that are *about* Indian Baptists. The state of Indian Baptist churches is a topic that is currently circulating within various Indian Baptist networks and is increasingly infiltrating the messages at revivals, conferences, gatherings, email circulations and media releases. These conversations focus on the current state of Indian Baptist churches, but they also consider the position of the Indian Baptist community in relation to the extended Baptist community. These are timely and important conversations about the challenges that face Indian Baptist leaders looking to propel their own interests onto the national and international Baptist platform. These conversations, however, say little about the state of Indian Baptist church planting at the local level.

There is a quiet realization among Indian Baptist congregations in Oklahoma that their churches are not growing. There are currently over 250 Indian Baptist churches in the state of Oklahoma, with new churches being planted still. As of August 2008, one quarter of the Indian Baptist churches in Oklahoma were pastorless and/or lacking sufficient personnel. First Indian Baptist in Shawnee, one of the larger Indian Baptist churches in the state with a reputation for conducting mission work, remains pastorless at the same time that its own missions grow into churches and begin their own missions. Earlsboro Indian Mission, one of several missions started by First Indian in Shawnee, is

only one of several Indian missions struggling to achieve independent status as an autonomous church, despite low attendance rates and financial setbacks. Earlsboro was one of a handful of Indian congregations in the past couple of years to lose their church building from fire. Cornerstone Indian Baptist Church lost three song leaders during my time there, each of whom went to serve in other Indian churches.

The things that appear to be struggles for one Indian Baptist church indicate growth happening in another Indian church. Churches struggle to retain pastors and other key personnel, in part, because these positions need to be filled in new churches. Membership retention continues to be a problem, in part, because one church's core member may become the charter member of a new mission. The true growth of a church does not necessarily happen when its pews are filled; rather, the growth of Indian churches is defined by the willingness of its members to persist in spite of these challenges. Recall one church member's words, "the seeds and everything been planted...we may not see this until we get to Heaven, what's happened."

My hope is that the stories throughout this research underscore the mindfulness with which native church planters engage in the complexities of planting new Indian works in contested cultural spaces. The contest for many native Christians is not between being native and being Christian. Rather, the contest for many native church planters is reconciling the local and historical

conditions that bring some individuals to live comfortably within the confines of native culture, while others come to live against it. Further, the realities of native-led church planting suggest that the confines of what is constituted as “native culture” are continually reshaped.

The idea that native culture is changing is not new, but there are reasons for anthropologists (and others) to be cautious in overstating this. The example of cultural conservatism speaks to this point; a focus on cultural change overlooks “the ways that those whom we study employ *representations* of boundedness” (Harrison 1999: 10). The discourse of cultural conservatism, however, is more than a mere representation of boundedness. It is a discourse about culture that, “is used selectively for that which seems most salient to the outsiders, namely difference” (Barth 1995: 65). Discourses of cultural conservatism act as vehicles for inclusion and exclusion, creating variable subject positions that condition who participates comfortably within its notion of culture and who ultimately opts to live against it.

A number of important ethnographies deal with the many ways that “being native” is increasingly defined according to interests external to native communities. Dombrowski’s *Against Culture*, an example cited throughout these chapters, explores how emerging relationships between native communities and commercial industries and the legal structuring of native life according to federal policies creates a “politicized space where individuals are limited to a

specific arena for being ‘native’” (2001: 82). A final reference relevant to the story of native-led church planting:

...Does the stuff of culture...tell us about culture as a thing in itself, or can it be used to understand the specific sorts of historical processes through which the worlds and lives of particular people come to be, and how these worlds are seen by themselves and others as particularly meaningful or particularly meaningless, and in either case, as something worth struggling for or over? [Dombrowski 2001: 185]

I have no doubt that the church planters with whom I spoke believe that the work of spreading the Good Word is worth struggling over. I hope that the stories in these chapters present the experiences of native-led church planting as a worthwhile endeavor, but also as something that fundamentally challenges the nature of community life for both the church planters and the communities that become their targets. At stake for native church planters working in their own communities is the possibility that choosing everlasting life beyond this world means living on the margins of culture while in this world.

*And what you sow, you do not sow that body that shall be, but mere grain—
perhaps wheat or some other grain.
But God gives it a body as He pleases, and to each seed its own body
(1 Corinthians 15: 37-38, NKJV).*

AFTERWORD

On Monday, May 10, 2010, a massive system of tornados swept through the state of Oklahoma. The most devastating of these tornados began in eastern Cleveland County, and made its way east toward the community of Little Axe, Oklahoma. The storm left irreparable damage for many in the Little Axe area, but the ultimate impact of the storm for members of the Little Axe community has yet to be fully realized. Residents both in and around the community of Little Axe scarcely remember a time that a tornado has struck so close.

Absentee Shawnee people are not raised to be fearful of tornados. It is too soon to speculate if or how the storm might disrupt the deeply held beliefs of the local native people that they are protected from many of the same conditions that continue to alter life for those outside of the community. Perhaps the storm represents yet another reason for the culturally exclusive community in Little Axe to closely monitor the cultural spaces that ensure local meanings, social relations, and cultural forms remain in tact.

The storm created a flurry of explanations and responses within only a few short days of the immediate devastation. Relevant to the story of church planting presented here is the following explanation from a church member told to me only six days after the tornado hit. The church member recounted a week of sleeplessness and confusion surrounding questions about why the community of Little Axe had been struck with this hardship. The answer became clear as

she thought about the church. The church had been struggling financially in the months before the storm, and many in the church wondered about the financial feasibility of upcoming trips, activities, and other obligations. The storm, according to this church member, served to remind the congregation that their original commitment was to the community of Little Axe. The storm created opportunities for the church to engage with the community, offering assistance and testimonies where needed. Opportunities to engage with members of this community have proven difficult for some church members, and yet this disaster reminds church planters that conditions are always favorable for growing the body of Christ.

Bibliography

Abing, Kevin J.

- 1998 A Holy Battleground: Methodist, Baptist and Quaker Missionaries Among the Shawnee Indians, 1830–1844. *Kansas History* 21: 188-237.
- 2001 Before Bleeding Kansas: Christian Missionaries, Slavery, and the Shawnee Indians in Pre-Territorial Kansas, 1844-1854. *Kansas History* 24: 54-70.

Alford, Thomas Wildcat

- 1929 The Four Gospels of Our Lord Jesus Christ in Shawnee Indian Language. Xenia, Ohio: W.A. Galloway.
- 1936 Civilization and the Story of the Absentee Shawnees. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- 1979 Civilization and the Story of the Absentee Shawnees: as told to Florence Drake by Thomas Wildcat Alford, with a forward by Angie Debo. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

Althusser, Louis

- 1971 Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes Toward an Investigation. In *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. London: New Left Books.
- 1976 *Essays in Self-Criticism*. London: NLB.
- 1990 *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists and Other Essays*. London: Verso.

Andrews, Kenneth

- 1994 Shawnee Grammar. Ph.D. dissertation, University of South Carolina, Columbia.
- 2002 Shawnee Noun Inflection. *European Review of Native American Studies* 16(1): 17-26.

Asad, Talal

- 1993 *Genealogies of Religion: Disciplines and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.

- Axtell, James
 1985 *The Invasion Within: The Contest of Cultures in Colonial North America*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Barth, Fredrik
 1995 Other Knowledge and Other Ways of Knowing. *Journal of Anthropological Research* 51(1): 65-68.
- Beaver, R. Pierce
 1966 *Church, State, and the American Indians: Two and a Half Centuries Of Partnership in Missions Between Protestant Churches and Government*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House.
- Beatty, James K.
 2009 Interpreting the Shawnee Sun: Literacy and Cultural Persistence in Indian Territory, 1833-1841. *Kansas History* 31(4): 243-259.
- Bell, David and Gill Valentine, eds.
 1995 *Mapping Desire*. New York: Routledge.
- Berg, Bruce L.
 2001 *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*. 4th ed. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Bialecki, Jon, Naomi Haynes, and Joel Robbins
 2008 The Anthropology of Christianity. *Religion Compass* 2(6): 1139-1158.
- Biolsi, Thomas
 2001 *Deadliest Enemies: Law and the Making of Race Relations On and Off Rosebud Reservation*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Boling, Jerry
 1980 *Selected Problems in Shawnee Syntax*. Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University.
- Bourdieu, Pierre
 1993 *The Field of Cultural Production*. West Sussex: Columbia University Press.
- Buchholz, Brad
 2009 "Ric Burns and 'We Shall Remain'", *Austin360.com*, April 20, 2009.

http://www.austin360.com/blogs/content/shared-gen/blogs/austin/tvblog/entries/2009/04/20/ric_burns_and_we_shall_remain.html

Buckley, Thomas

- 2002 Standing Ground: Yurok Indian Spirituality, 1850-1990. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Bucko, Raymond A.

- 1998 The Lakota Ritual of the Sweat Lodge: History and Contemporary Practice. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Callender, Charles

- 1978 Shawnee *In* Handbook of North American Indians. Vol 15. Bruce Trigger, Ed. Pp. 622-635. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution.

Cannell, Fenella

- 2006 Introduction: The Anthropology of Christianity *In* The Anthropology of Christianity. Fenella Cannell, Ed. Pp. 1-50. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Cattelino, Jessica

- 2008 High Stakes: Florida Seminole Gaming and Sovereignty. Durham: Duke University Press.

Cavanaugh, Beverly Diamond

- 1992 Christian Hymns in Eastern Woodlands Communities: Performance Contexts. *In* Musical Repercussions of 1492: Explorations, Encounters, and Identities. Edited by Carol E. Robertson, pp. 381-394. Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution.

Clark, C. Blue

- 2004 Native Christianity Since 1800. *In* Handbook of North American Indians, Vol 14. Raymond D. Fogelson, Ed. Pp. 742-752. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution.

Clifford, James

- 1988 The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- 1997 Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Coleman, Simon

- 2008 The Abominations of Anthropology: Christianity, Ethnographic Taboos and the Meanings of 'Science'. *In* On the Margins of Religion. Frances Pine and João de Pina-Cabr, eds. Pps. 39-58. New York: Berghahn Books.

Costa, David J.

- 2001 Shawnee Noun Plurals. *Anthropological Linguistics* 43: 255-287.

Cranford, David J. and Don G. Wyckoff

- 2009 Geoarchaeology along the Cross Timbers. *In* Geoarchaeology and the Cross Timbers. David J. Cranford, Elsbeth L. Dowd, and Don G. Wyckoff, eds. Oklahoma Anthropological Society, Memoir 13 pp.1-6. Norman, OK.

David Ortiz, Leonard

- 1999 "And the Stones Shall Cry Out": Native American Identity *In* The Lawrence Indian United Methodist Church. *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 36(3/4): 363-378.

Deloria, Jr., Vine

- 1988 Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- 1994 God is Red: A Native View of Religion. Golden: Fulcrum Publishing.
- 1999 For This Land: Writings on Religion in America, Edited and with an Introduction by James Treat. New York: Routledge.

Devons, Carol

- 1992 Countering Colonization: Native American Women and Great Lakes Missions, 1630-1900. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Dombrowski, Kirk

- 2001 Against Culture: Development, Politics, and Religion in Indian Alaska. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Doris Duke Indian Oral History Collection

- 1968 "General Attitudes toward White Investigation of Absentee Shawnees". Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma.

- Draper, David E.
 1982 Abba isht tuluwa: The Christian Hymns of the Mississippi Choctaw.
 American Indian Culture and Research Journal 6(1): 43-61.
- Engelke, Matthew and Matt Tomlinson, Eds.
 2006 The Limits of Meaning: Case Studies in the Anthropology of Christianity.
 New York: Berghahn Books.
- Fanon, Franz
 1963 The Wretched of the Earth. New York: Grove.
- Fenton, William N.
 1953 The Iroquois Eagle Dance: An Offshoot of the Calumet Dance; with An
 Analysis of the Iroquois Eagle Dance and Songs, by Gertrude P. Kurath.
 Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 156, Washington.
- Fogelson, Raymond D.
 1999 Nationalism and the Americanist Tradition. *In* Theorizing the
 Americanist Tradition. Lisa Philips Valentine & Regna Darnell,
 eds. Pp: 75-83. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Garriott, William and Kevin Lewis O'Neill
 2008 Who is a Christian?: Toward a Dialogic Approach in the Anthropology of
 Christianity. Anthropological Theory 8(4): 381-398.
- Gatschet, Albert S.
 1877 Shawnee Grammatical Elements. Manuscript No. 2987 in National
 Anthropological Archives. Smithsonian Institutions: Washington.
- 1878-93 Vocabularies, Texts, Notes: Shawnee, Potawatomi, Chippewa, Mainly
 1878-1879. Manuscript No. 68 in National Anthropological Archives.
 Smithsonian Institutions: Washington.
- Gill, Rachel
 1997 Of Apples and Seeds and Indians. Missions USA 68(3): 88-99.
- Griffin, James
 1937 The Chronological Position and Ethnological Relationships of the Fort
 Ancient Aspect. American Antiquity 2: 273-276.
- Goddard, Ives
 1967 The Algonquian Independent Indicative. National Museum of Canada
 Bulletin 214: 66-106.

- 1974 Remarks on the Algonquian Independent Indicative. *IJAL* 40: 317-27.
- Hall, Stuart
- 1985 Signification, Representation, Ideology: Althusser and the Post-Structuralist Debates. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 2(2): 91-114.
- 1996 Introduction: Who Needs 'Identity'? *In Questions of Cultural Identity*. Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay, eds. London: Sage.
- Harding, Susan
- 1991 Representing Fundamentalism: The Problem of the Repugnant Cultural Other. *Social Research* 58(2): 373- 393.
- 2000 The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Harkin, Michael E.
- 1997 The Heiltsuks: Dialogues of Culture and History on the Northwest Coast. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- 2004 Reassessing Revitalization Movements: Perspectives from North America and the Pacific Islands. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Harrison, Simon
- 1999 Cultural Boundaries. *Anthropology Today* 15(5): 10-13.
- Hefner, Robert W.
- 1993 Conversion to Christianity: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives on a Great Transformation. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Herskovits, Melville J.
- 1930 Culture Areas of Africa. *Journal of the International African Institute* 3(1): 59-77
- Hickerson, Nancy Parrott
- 1957 An Acoustic Analysis of Shawnee Speech. Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Anthropology, Indiana University.
- Howard, James
- 1981 Shawnee! The Ceremonialism of a Native American Tribe and Its Cultural Background. Athens: Ohio University Press.

Howard, James H., and Willie Lena

- 1984 Oklahoma Seminoles: Medicines, Magic, and Religion. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

Isaac McCoy Papers

- N.d. Isaac McCoy Papers (microfilm edition), manuscript division, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka.

Jackson, Jason Baird

- 2003a Yuchi Ceremonial Life: Performance, Meaning, and Tradition in a Contemporary American Indian Community. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- 2003b The Opposite of Powwow: Ignoring and Incorporating the Intertribal War Dance in the Oklahoma Stomp Dance Community. *Plains Anthropologist* 48(187): 237- 253.
- 2005 East Meets West: On Stomp Dance and Powwow Worlds in Oklahoma. *In* Powwow. Clyde Ellis, Luke Eric Lassiter, and Gary H. Dunham, editors. Pp. 172-197. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- 2010 Boasian Ethnography and Contemporary Intellectual Property Debates in Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society. 154 (1): 40-49.

Jackson, Jason Baird and Mary S. Linn

- 2000 Calling in the Members: Linguistic Form and Cultural Context in a Yuchi Ritual Speech Genre. *Anthropological Linguistics*. 42:61-80.

Jackson, Jason Baird and Raymond D. Fogelson

- 2004 Introduction *In* Handbook of North American Indians. Vol. 14. Southeast Raymond D. Fogelson, editor. Pp. 1-13. Washington: Smithsonian Institution.

Jackson, Jason Baird and Victoria Lindsay Levine

- 2002 Singing for Garfish: Music and Woodland Communities in Eastern Oklahoma. *Ethnomusicology* 46(2): 284-306.

Kan, Sergei

- 1999 Memory Eternal: Tlingit Culture and Russian Orthodox Christianity through Two Centuries. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

- Keane, Webb
 2007 *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Keeling, Richard
 1992 Music and Culture History among the Yurok and Neighboring Tribes of Northwestern California. *Journal of Anthropological Research* 48(1): 25-48.
- Kidwell, Clara Sue
 1995 *Choctaws and Missionaries, 1818-1918*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Kidwell, Clara Sue, Homer Noley, and George E. "Tink" Tinker
 2001 *A Native American Theology*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.
- Kinietz, Vernon and Ermine W. Voegelin, eds.
 1939 *Shawnese Traditions: C.C. Trowbridge's Account*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Kroeber, Alfred L.
 1939 *Cultural and Natural Areas of Native North America*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- LaBarre, Weston
 1989 *The Peyote Cult*, 5th ed. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Lambert, Valerie Long
 2000 Native Spiritual Traditions and the Tribal State: The Oklahoma Choctaws in the Late Twentieth Century. *In Spirit Wars: Native North American Religions in the Age of Nation Building*. Ronald Niezen, ed. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Lampe, Frederick P.
 2010 The Anthropology of Christianity: Context, Contestation, Rupture and Continuity. *Reviews in Anthropology* 39(1): 66-88.
- Lassiter, Luke Eric, Clyde Ellis, and Ralph Kotay
 2002 *The Jesus Road: Kiowas, Christianity and Indian Hymns*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

- Lavie, Smadar
 1990 *The Poetics of Military Occupation: Mzeina Allegories of Bedouin Identity Under Israeli and Egyptian Rule*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Linton, Ralph, Ed.
 1940 *Acculturation in Seven Native American Tribes*. New York: Appleton-Century.
- Linton, Ralph
 1943 Nativistic Movements. *American Anthropologists* 45(2): 230-40.
- McElwain, Thomas
 1990 "The Rainbow Will Carry Me": The Language of Seneca Christianity as Reflected in Hymns. *In Religion in Native North America*. Christopher Vecsey, ed. Pp. 83-101. Moscow: University of Idaho Press.
- McLoughlin, William Gerald
 1994 *The Cherokees and Christianity, 1794-1870: Essays on Acculturation and Cultural Persistence*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- McMurtrie, Douglas C.
 1933 *The Shawnee Sun: The First Indian-language Periodical Published in the United States*. *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 2 (November): 339-42.
- McNally, Michael D.
 2000 *Ojibwe Singers: Hymns, Grief, and a Native Culture in Motion*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- McNay, Lois
 1994 *Foucault: A Critical Introduction*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Miller, Wick R.
 1959 An Outline of Shawnee Historical Phonology. *International Journal of American Linguistics* 25(1): 16-21.
- Mithun, Marianne
 1999 *The Languages of Native North America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Moreau, A. Scott, Ed.
 2000 *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*. Ada: Baker Academic.

- Morris, John W.
 1980 Ghost Towns in Oklahoma. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Nettl, Bruno
 1953 The Shawnee Musical Style: Historical Perspective in Primitive Music. *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 9: 227-285.
- Niezen, Ronald
 2000 Spirit Wars: Native North American religions in the age of nation building. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Noe, Randolph
 2001 The Shawnee Indians: An Annotated Bibliography. Native American Bibliographies, No. 26. Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, Inc.
- Noley, Homer
 1991 First White Frost: Native Americans and United Methodism. Nashville: Abingdon.
- Norcross, Amoena Brigitte
 1993 Noun Incorporation in Shawnee. Ph.D. dissertation, University of South Carolina.
- O'Bear, Peggy
 1962 Forced Move to Bing Heartbreak for Indian Families. *The Oklahoman*, March 25: A5.
- O'Reilly, Karen
 2005 *Ethnographic Method*. New York: Routledge.
- Orta, Andrew
 1998 Converting Difference: Metaculture, Missionaries, and the Politics of Locality. Theme Issue, "Relocating Bolivia: Popular Political Perspectives," *Ethnology* 37(2): 165-185.
- Parks, Douglas R.
 1975 Shawnee Noun Inflection. *In* *Studies in Southeastern Indian Languages*. James Crawford, ed. Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- 1999 George A. Dorsey, James R. Murie, and the Textual Documentation of Skiri Pawnee. *In* *Theorizing the Americanist Tradition*. Lisa Philips Valentine and Regna Darnell, eds. Pp. 227-244. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

- Pilling, James Constantine
 1891 Bibliography of the Algonquian Languages. Washington: Government Printing Offices.
- Ragland, Hobert D.
 1955 Missions of the Society of Friends Among the Indian Tribes of the Sac and Fox Agency. *Chronicles of Oklahoma* (33): 169-182.
- Ramirez, Renya
 2007 *Native Hubs: Culture, Community, and Belonging in Silicon Valley and Beyond*. Durhan: Duke University Press.
- Robbins, Joel
 2004 *Becoming Sinners: Christianity and Moral Torment in a Papua New Guinea Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
 2007 Continuity Thinking and the Problem of Christian Culture: Belief, Time, and the Anthropology of Christianity. *Current Anthropology* 48(1): 5-38.
- Robert Kerr Collection
 1962 Box 4. Carl Albert Congressional Research and Studies Center Congressional Archives, University of Oklahoma.
- Rosaldo, Renato
 1988 Ideology, Place, and People without Culture. Theme Issue, "Place and Voice in Anthropological Theory," *Cultural Anthropology* 3(1): 77-87.
 1993 *Culture and Truth: the Remaking of Social Analysis*. London: Routledge.
- Sa'ar, Amalia
 1998 Carefully on the Margins: Christian-Palestinians in Haifa between Nation and State. *American Ethnologist* 25(2): 214-239.
- Schultz, Jack
 1999 *The Seminole Baptist Churches of Oklahoma: Maintaining a Traditional Community*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Schutz, Noel W., Jr.
 1975 The Study of Shawnee Myth in an Ethnographic and Ethnohistorical Perspective. Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Anthropology, Indiana University, Bloomington.

- Selstad, Leif
 N.d. Unpublished Field notes, 1979-1981, 2003.
- 1986 Carrying the World Along: Minority Fields and Identity Management in a Shawnee Indian Community in Oklahoma. Hovedfagsoppgave Sosialanthropologisk institutt Universitetet I Bergen.
- Sider, Gerald
 1993 Lumbee Indian Histories. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- 1997 Against Experience: The Struggles for History, Tradition, and Hope among a Native American People. *In Between History and Histories: The Making of Silences and Commemorations*. Gerald Sider and Gavin Smith, eds. Pp. 62-79. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Simond, Wm. Joe
 1999 The Norman Project. Bureau of Reclamation History Program. Denver: Research on Historic Reclamation Projects.
- Smith, Andrea
 2008 Native Americans and the Christian Right: The Gendered Politics of Unlikely Alliances. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Speck, Frank G.
 1911 Missions in the Creek Nation. *Southern Workman*. 40(4): 206-208.
- Spencer, J.
 1909 Shawnee Folk-Lore. *Journal of American Folklore* 22(85): 319-326.
- Stewart, Omer C.
 1987 Peyote Religion: A History. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Stromberg, Peter G.
 1993 Language and Self-Transformation: A Study of the Christian Conversion Narrative. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Strong, Pauline Turner
 2005 Recent Ethnographic Research on North American Indigenous Peoples. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 34: 253-68.
- Swan, Daniel C.
 1999 Peyote Religious Art: Symbols of Faith and Belief. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Swanson, Tod D.

- 1997 Through Family Eyes: Towards a More Adequate Perspective for Viewing Native American Religious Life. Theme Issue, "To Hear the Eagles Cry: Contemporary Themes in Native American Spirituality: Part III: Historical Reflections," *American Indian Quarterly* 20 (3/4): 57-71.

Swanton, John

- 1922 Early History of the Creek Indians and Their Neighbors. Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin, No. 73.

Ted Reynolds Papers, 1892-1987.

- N.d. Ted Reynolds Paper, 1892-1987. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Special Collections Library.

Tinker, George E.

- 1993 *Missionary Conquest: the Gospel and Native American Cultural Genocide*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- 2004 *Spirit and Resistance: Political Theology and American Indian Liberation*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Tomlinson, Matt and Matthew Engelke

- 2006 *Meaning, Anthropology and Christianity*. In *The Limits of Meaning: Case Studies in the Anthropology of Christianity*. Matthew Engelke and Matt Tomlinson, eds. Pps. 1-37. New York: Berghahn Books.

Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt

- 1993 *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen: Marginality in an Out-of-the-way-place*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- 1994 From the Margins. Theme Issue, "Further Inflections: Toward Ethnographies of the Future," *Cultural Anthropology* 9 (3): 279-297.

Treat, James, Ed.

- 1996 *Native and Christian: Indigenous Voices on Religious Identity in the United States and Canada*. New York: Routledge.

Treat, James

- 2003 *Around the Sacred Fire: Native Religious Activism in the Red Power Era; a Narrative Map of the Indian Ecumenical Conference*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Trigger, Bruce, ed.
 1978 Handbook of North American Indians, Vol. 15, Northeast. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Valentine, Lisa Philips
 1995 Making It Their Own: Severn Ojibwe Communicative Practices. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Vecsey, Christopher
 1997 The Paths of Kateri's Kin. South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Voegelin, Charles F.
 1936 The Shawnee Female Deity. Yale University Publications in Anthropology 10. New Haven: Yale University Press.
 1938-40 Shawnee Stems and the Jacob P. Dunn Miami Dictionary. Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis.
- Voegelin, C.F., and E.W. Voegelin
 1935 Shawnee Name Groups. American Anthropologist 37: 617-35.
 1944 The Shawnee Female Deity in Historical Perspective. American Anthropology, Vol. 46: 370-375.
 1946 Linguistic considerations of Northeastern North America. *In* Papers of the Robert S. Peabody Foundation. F. Johnson, ed. Archaeology 3.
- Voegelin, Erminie Wheeler
 1944 Mortuary Customs of the Shawnee and other Eastern Tribes. Prehistory Research Series 2(4): 226-444. Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society.
- Voegelin Erminie W. and Georg K. Neumann.
 1948 Shawnee Pots and Pottery Making. Pennsylvania Archaeologist 18(1-2): 3-12.
- Wade, Maria F.
 2008 Missions, Missionaries, and Native Americans: Long-Term Processes and Daily Practices. Gainesville: University of Florida Press.
- Wallace, Anthony
 1958 Revitalization Movements. American Anthropologist 58(2): 264-281.

- 1970 The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Walker, Jessica A.
- 2004 Perception and Management of Type II Diabetes: The Narrated Experience of Diabetes in an Absentee Shawnee Community. M.A. thesis, Department of Anthropology, University of Oklahoma.
- Warren, Stephen
- 1994 "The Baptists, the Methodists, and the Shawnees: Conflicting Cultures in Indian Territory, 1833-1834" *Kansas History* 3: 148-161.
- 2005 The Shawnees and Their Neighbors: 1795-1870. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Williamson, Dana
- N.d. Prayer for Native Americans Being Heard, Blackaby Ministries International News Archives, <http://blackaby.org/news/archives.asp>.
- Wissler, Clark
- 1914 The Influence of the Horse in the Development of Plains Culture. *American Anthropologist* 16: 1-25.
- 1917 The American Indian: An Introduction to the Anthropology of the New World. New York: Peter Smith Publisher.
- Witthoft, John and William A. Hunter.
- 1955 The Seventeenth-Century Origins of the Shawnee. *Ethnohistory* 2(1): 42-57.
- Yardy, Jr., Bill
- 1990 Little Axe Baptist Mission History. Church History Committee, First Indian Baptist Church: Shawnee, Oklahoma.
- Zehner, Edwin
- 2005 Orthodox Hybridities: Anti-Syncretism and Localization in the Evangelical Christianity of Thailand. *Anthropological Quarterly* 78(3): 585-617.

Appendix A. Notes on Abbreviations and Use of Biblical Texts

The following abbreviations are used throughout the texts:

BF&M	Baptist Faith and Message
BGCO	Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma
BIA	Bureau of Indian Affairs
CIBC	Cornerstone Indian Baptist Church
EIBM	Earlsboro Indian Baptist Mission
EKG	Empowering Kingdom Growth
FIS	First Indian Baptist of Shawnee
FNAC	Fellowship of Native American Christians
IFC	Indian Falls Creek
NAMB	North American Mission Board
NKJV	New King James Version (Bible)
SBC	Southern Baptist Church

I have chosen to use biblical verses at the beginnings and throughout all of the chapters. Specific verses are chosen because the content of each verse encapsulates the broader themes presented in each chapter. The use of biblical verses to introduce an ethnographic text is not typical. However, I chose to narrate each chapter in such a way that reflects the perspectives of the church planters whose stories make up the content of the chapters. This is the story of native-led church planting from the perspective of the church planters. The use of Bible verses is central to the act of worship, but the recitation of Bible verses is also pervasive in the everyday stories that church members tell about the many ways that their ordinary lives are made extraordinary by faith.

The New King James Version is used throughout the text. There is no reason that this version was chosen over another version.