Spiritualities of the Displaced: An Ethnographic Study of Homeless Lived Faith

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Theology in the Divinity School
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2013
ABSTRACT

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Abstract

My dissertation is a project of practical theology that starts with the problem of homelessness. It seeks to better understand the lived faith of homeless persons by listening to the voices of the extreme poor. It asserts that one common feature of homelessness is loss, particularly the loss of being accepted as fully human. This plays out in stigmatization and shame, whereby homeless persons are treated and can come to perceive themselves as transgressors matter out of place. Using an ethnographic method and a situational analysis of social worlds, I participated in and observed three homeless social worlds at a downtown church in Nashville: a midweek worship service, a street paper, and a weekly support group. I also used a photo-elicitation process to discover how the homeless found sacred spaces and held onto sacred things as they lived on the streets. Because it is important to understand the larger historic and socioeconomic forces and material realities impacting the lived faith of the homeless, I also describe the making of the places of Nashville, the church, and the three social worlds. Besides participation-observation fieldnotes, my data primarily came from interviews with 40 homeless and formerly homeless persons as well as the leaders of each social world. I conclude with a theological reading and evaluation of the church’s homeless social worlds according to my own theological normative claims of the homeless person being beloved and nourishing a sense of his or her agency. Using Rowan Williams and Sandra Schneiders, I work toward an adequate definition of spirituality that allows for attention to the radically different lives of homeless persons who typically remain invisible to most Christians and academic theology, and I make a case for spirituality as a viable analytical concept in practical theology and as a discipline in theological education.
To the homeless who shared their stories with me to make this project possible and to all my friends, teachers, and family who supported me along the way
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Introduction

Seeing a face among the homelessness: Coyote

Coyote, a 36-year-old single white man, is a native Nashvillian who recently got low-income housing after living almost the last fifteen years in and out of homelessness. He was raised in a middle class family by a mother who is a homemaker and a father who is a local university professor. Coyote’s parents are Catholic and put him and his siblings through parochial schools. Throughout elementary and secondary school, Coyote repeatedly changed schools because of low academic performance and behavioral problems (hence his name “Coyote” that he earned from howling in class) or what he calls his “rebellious personality” that later got diagnosed as schizophrenia when he was first hospitalized at 19. Coyote went on medication but dropped out of college after two years to join the Navy.

Coyote first became homeless at 22 when he left the Navy. Being estranged from his family, he felt he had no place to go and turned to Nashville’s Salvation Army where a homeless person “showed [him] the ropes.” He reached out to his mother who took him in with his promise to take his medication. She helped him get an apartment, but without consistently taking his medication and steady work, he failed to keep up with his rent. For the next several years, Coyote found night shelter among motel rooms, squats with other homeless in backyard bushes, his car (before he lost it to repossession), a storage center when management looked the other way, and churches through Room in the Inn. His last resort was the Mission where he liked the movies but felt the least safe. During this time he says out of fear for his safety he rarely slept at night, which proved
counter productive during the day to work whatever jobs he could find—day labor, recycling cans, seasonal work at sporting stadiums. Often, though, work was not readily available and he spent his days “trying not to look conspicuous and just moving—I couldn’t hang out in one place for too long. Barnes and Nobles was a great place with its many aisles to get lost in.” Coyote says he does not like to dwell on this time. “It’s a lifestyle I wouldn’t wish on anyone because you’re always cut off from your resources and can’t get a leg up.”

One of the hardest things about homelessness, Coyote thinks, is doing time in jail: “I’d get arrested because I was having to live my life outside and then those arrests made it harder for me to ever get inside in my own home.” He was incarcerated multiple times, his first charge being from Vanderbilt University (ironically, his father’s employer) for criminal trespassing when, on a hot summer day, he went inside a building to use a water fountain and the bathroom. Still, he returned to campus as one survival routine where he pretended to be a law student, attended lectures and classes, and used the library for sleeping. This worked for a while until he tried to see his father and was arrested again and then again for public disorderly conduct. Coyote never tried to get arrested in order to get off the streets and hated life in jail: “Nothing is your own, not even your underwear. I got beat up all the time…I became withdrawn and just waited for the day to be out and in control of my own lifestyle, and look at others in civilian clothing and not jumpsuits and guard uniforms.”

Besides his arrests, Coyote named losing a sense of himself as “a normal man” as a difficult aspect of homeless life. He says it has been important for him to prove to
people that he is “still educated” and “a man of society.” He has refused to isolate himself and “gets out” into the community for free public events at the library, state museum, and parks because it has helped to make him “feel more like the upper-middle class gentleman I used to be before I had my riches to rags story. I try to feel productive, you know, go to events that say I’m still a man of culture and enriching myself, even if the staff might stare at me and take question to my being there, especially if they knew the truth about me.”

Today, Coyote is proud to say that he is formerly homeless and is in regular contact with his mother and sister although his father still remains aloof. He found low-income housing at Parthenon Towers, in midtown behind Centennial Park. It is a precarious living situation, still. Within these months, he has been displaced more than once because of bedbugs and a fire—but with some safety net of family and a few friends, he has been able to not cycle back into homelessness.

In many ways, Coyote is a religious person. While hospitalized for his schizophrenia, he made a leather bracelet with “Jedi of therapy” on it. He likes to wear it because it reminds him, to use Star Wars language, that he can make it with God’s “Force” helping him. Coyote likes to read the Bible and hosts a Bible study at his apartment for his neighbors. One of his favorite sections in the Bible is Proverbs 31 that he liked to read in jail. Reading about the faithful and “perfect wife” gave him something to hope for. Coyote likes going to different churches for fellowship as well as for food and clothes. In his mid twenties, he began attending a Mormon church. He says he is “not sold” on the Mormon beliefs, but the worship always provides a time for people to
come stand at the pulpit and bear testimony and he feels like this is one place people will
listen to him. At first, Coyote liked to use his testimony time as a public confessional
where he asked for forgiveness for all of the times he was hostile while unmedicated.
Lately, he says that he testifies this: “What I am, missionaries have been. What I am, the
prophet was. What I am, Civil Rights leaders have been. Whether I’m in jail or the
hospital or homelessness, I don’t let it get me down. I can survive this. Everyday will be
a new day and I thank God for waking me up and that I’m not dead yet because when
you’re living, that is the greatest adventure.”

On Wednesdays, Coyote takes the bus to Downtown Presbyterian Church. For
over ten years, he has attended there the Living Room support group where he feels close
to God and can express his faith by giving advice and encouragement to new people on
the streets. He thinks the Living Room is sacred space because of the “empathetic people
there who show me God.” Occasionally before the Living Room meetings he will first
go to the chapel and attend the homeless worship service led by DPC’s pastor. He finds
the message is usually helpful for some of his problems relating to his family, but says it
is hard to sit still through the service, so more often he chooses to wait in line for
Fellowship Hall to open and eat a meal provided by volunteers often from other churches.
After the Living Room meeting, he goes to The Contributor vendor street paper release
meetings. Coyote sells the homeless street paper because he enjoys meeting new people.
He also wants to teach them that the homeless are more than panhandlers and thinks this
Teaching is another part of his walk of faith.

Coyote began praying more when he became homeless not to ask God for a
particular job “like he’s Santa Claus to ask for material gain”; instead, he began praying
more because he really had no one to talk to except for God. Coyote thinks God cares
about his future, but he adds, “Sometimes I think I’m learning through this, that this is all
temporary and one day I will recover. I don’t know. My mental illness mars my image
of God. I think homelessness mars my image of God, too. I cried out to God to kill me
in my pain. I felt like a leper. I had no one to tend to my pain and wounds.”

I interviewed Coyote as a part of my research on the spiritual lives of homeless
persons. I begin with Coyote’s experience of homelessness because it gives a face to and
illumines a contemporary dilemma. My project is a theological one that assumes
practical theology seeks to understand and reflect on the moral and religious dimensions
of basic issues and problems immanent in the world and their relationship to Christian
practices. My project also assumes theologies are generated by “wounds,” by situations
that matter and long to be addressed.¹ Homeless persons who the larger public both
neglects to see and see as stigmatized and shameful (and then that the homeless
themselves may see as such, as revealed in Coyote’s words of feeling his image of God is
marred) is such a wound that deserves theological attention. But where the homeless find
hope to carry on, have moments of gratitude and care, and experience being fully
human—the good of their displaced lives needs theological attention as well.

Given their traumatic realities, how do the homeless use their faith to interpret
their dire circumstances and how do their experiences of displacement shape their

¹ Mary McClintock Fulkerson, Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church
“belief-practices”?2 Where do we see their lives of faith either negatively impacted by or transformed and healed of stigma and shame? Finally, what role does an urban church and its social worlds of care play in supporting as well as constraining the practices of homeless persons in the face of their severe deprivations?3 This dissertation will address these questions in an ethnographic study of the belief-practices of the displaced persons involved in three social worlds of homeless ministry located at Downtown Presbyterian Church: a weekly worship service, a weekly support group called the Living Room, and a street paper, The Contributor. While some of my data will come from the leaders and caregivers of these three homeless social worlds at DPC, my project will focus more on how this care (be it expressed in worship, a support group, or an opportunity for employment) is understood when received by the homeless—how those “strangers” incorporate, reject, or improvise on that care in their own lived faith to encounter the divine, create community, and buttress their perhaps fragile sense of self.

This introductory chapter first examines the features of the wound of

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2 Susan Dunlap uses this term to get at what she calls the inextricably linked relationship between beliefs and practices and to move beyond the dualism found in theological scholarship—discussing beliefs or practices without the other is to neglect a unified relationship or a relationship where the two are in dissonance. Susan Dunlap, Caring Cultures (Waco: Baylor Press, 2009), 10.

3 When I say social worlds, I am invoking Adele Clarke’s frame of situational analysis, a theory I am using in my ethnographic method. Clarke defines a social world as the site that “lays out collective actors, key nonhuman elements and the arena(s) of commitments and discourses within which they are engaged in ongoing negotiations.” Clarke gives an illustration of the arena of a hospital and its social worlds, such as staff, physicians, and nursing. See Adele Clarke, Situational Analysis: Grounded Theory after the Postmodern Turn (Thousand Oaks: Sage Press, 2005), xxii, 118. For my project, the arenas are DPC and the city of Nashville. I will say more about situational analysis in my methods section.
homelessness and provides a working definition of homelessness for this project. Given
my assertion of the influence of stigma and shame in shaping spiritualities of the
homeless and their bodily practices in social relations, it also provides background
information on and definitions of the terms stigma and shame. Finally, the introduction
offers a word on my methodology of ethnography and my interview population as well as
an overview of subsequent chapters.

Beginning to address the “wound” of homelessness: its features and a definition

Homelessness is a significant global problem. According to the United Nations
Habitat Agenda, more than one billion human beings lack adequate shelter and are living
in unacceptable conditions of poverty.4 Homelessness is also one of the most pressing
issues in the United States, particularly in regards to public policy and mental health, and
the recent 2008 recession and foreclosure crisis. This recent economic downturn has
acerbated two structural trends largely responsible for the late twentieth-century rise in
U.S. homelessness: an increasing shortage of affordable rental housing and public
assistance simultaneous with a rise in poverty.5 The National Alliance to End
Homelessness data point-in-time count in January 2013 found that over 640,000 persons
experience homelessness on any given night in the United States.6 Over the course of

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one year, another data point-in-time count finds that between 2.5 and 3.5 million persons will be homeless across the United States.\textsuperscript{7} This shows no evidence of a decline in the U.S. homeless population size when compared with the 1980s estimates offered by the U.S. Housing and Urban Department.

Despite homelessness being a tremendous problem globally and nationally, this population remains underserved in the United States when compared to non-homeless persons in a variety of ways. Although some studies have found homeless persons share many characteristics with the larger population of poor people, much of the existing research shows differences that suggest the homeless lack needed support.\textsuperscript{8} They are more likely to have the poorest mental and physical health and prognosis.\textsuperscript{9} They are more likely to have histories of substance use and abuse and histories of domestic and physical abuse.\textsuperscript{10} They also are more likely to have greater exposure to violence\textsuperscript{11} and

have higher rates of suicidal thoughts and behaviors.\textsuperscript{12}

Both macro (structural) and micro (personal) factors shape the pathways to homelessness that can become vicious cycles of financial, housing, health, family, and legal problems. Structural causes attributing to a person’s homelessness include tight housing and job markets, demographic trends (more single person or single parent households, for example), policy shifts (such as in mental health), and even a drug epidemic like crack cocaine.\textsuperscript{13} Such structural stressors or hard times can trigger personal vulnerabilities at the micro level and magnify their effects. One is an absence of supportive familial connections due to a variety of reasons including but not limited to abusive past home lives, abandonment, death, chemical dependencies, and parent-child conflict.\textsuperscript{14} Micro level causes also entail times of vulnerability (after release from a mental institution, a rehabilitation center, or prison). Mental illness, incarceration, and substance abuse are often seen leading to homelessness, but they can also be outcomes produced by or made worse by homelessness. Personal vulnerabilities can be mutually influencing and reinforce each other, so setting the stage for a situational crisis leading to homelessness. For example, homelessness and incarceration seem to increase the risk of each other and both factors appear to be impacted by mental illness, drug abuse, and

marginalized sociodemographics.\textsuperscript{15} No wonder Kenneth Leach, Anglican priest and scholar of spirituality, called homelessness a problem “impossible to compartmentalize or to speak coherently about without a sense of \textit{connectedness}.”\textsuperscript{16} A recent review of sociological literature notes a significant insight from the longitudinal literature on the fluid nature of housing status: once a person has initially become homeless, reentries into and exits from this underserved population are typical.\textsuperscript{17}

Examining the causes of and persons in homelessness shows that it is not really a monolithic group or a single uniform problem but a multitude of problems involving diverse persons, each being homeless for different reasons. There are differences among the homeless based on a wide variety of factors—context (streets, shelters, rural space, suburbs etc..), family status, age, gender, and race. An important difference is temporality. Three main types of homelessness based on temporality are transitional (often once-in-a-lifetime events for those briefly in transition between stable housing situations), episodic (short periods of homelessness happening on a repeated basis), and chronic (a more permanent condition).\textsuperscript{18} Both U.S. HUD point and period data estimates from 2009 document a national homeless population that, while mostly single men, has 

\textsuperscript{18} Randall Kuhn and Dennis Culhane, “Applying Cluster Analysis to Test a Typology of Homelessness by Pattern of Shelter Utilization: Results from the Analysis of Administrative Data,” \textit{American Journal of Community Psychology} 26, no.2 (April 1998): 207-232.
larger numbers of families, women, children, and minorities than in the past.\textsuperscript{19} Compared with the U.S. total and poverty populations, men and women veterans and blacks are overrepresented among the homeless.\textsuperscript{20} One cause of black overrepresentation is that blacks mostly comprise the housed population most at risk of becoming homeless—those living in inadequate and overcrowded housing. The relationship among high rates of residential segregation and lower affordable housing supply and inadequate housing quality and overcrowding in Black households is a significant predictor for black homelessness.\textsuperscript{21}

Research has suggested that men and women experience homelessness differently. A five year study done by Tessler et al (1993-1998) covering 15 cities in 9 states with over 7,000 interviews of homeless men and women showed that they cite different causes of their homelessness. Men report their homelessness stems from job loss, mental health problems, and alcohol and drug problems, while women name eviction, relationship conflict, and loss of support as the primary causes.\textsuperscript{22} This study

\textsuperscript{21} Carter, “From Exclusion to Destitution,” 33.
\textsuperscript{22} Richard Tessler et al, “Gender Differences in Self Reported Reasons for Homelessness,” \textit{Journal of Social Distress and the Homeless} 10, no.3 (July 2001): 243-54. Among women, this study found differences between women with and without children: women with children had the highest recent rate of physical assault and received more public assistance.
also found that these self-given reasons for homelessness were related not just to gender but other variables including age, marital status, race, veteran status, and receptivity to substance treatment. Another study of 228 single homeless men, single homeless women, and homeless women with children supported some of the results of Tessler’s study: the two groups of women were more likely to be sexually and physically assaulted, were less likely to have a history of substance abuse or criminal behavior, and reported greater psychological distress.23

Homeless men and women also seem to have different experiences with family due to gender. Homeless women have more contact with family members (Tessler et al. 2001) while men have less contact and when there is contact, it is most often with their mother, perhaps reflecting that mothers and not the adults sons, are the kin keepers (Pippert 2007, 88). Homeless men walking away from their family relationships can be explained as a loss of the provider role (and resulting loss of masculinity), but it can also be understood as their exertion of power in light of gendered expectations about parenting: shirking parental duties with little familial or social consequence is a freedom largely unavailable to women and so homeless fathers take advantage of these gendered expectations. (Pippert 2007, 90) Finally, homeless men and women differ in use of social services and numbers among the chronically displaced. Homeless women are more likely to be regular shelter users and bring dependent family members with them while men are less likely to use shelters and social services. This tendency among homeless

men has been linked to greater numbers of chronically homeless men as well as ideas about gender, dependency, and deservingness: homeless women are more likely to be housed because as women they are not seen as failures in their inability to provide for themselves and they “belong” in a home while men are seen as failures and not deserving of a home.\textsuperscript{24} While there is some overlap in causes of homelessness for men and women, and while other factors besides gender shape their experiences of it, scholars argue that homelessness is fundamentally a gendered experience.

The meaning of homelessness goes beyond a lack of adequate nighttime residence.\textsuperscript{25} A working definition for this project must account for its material as well as its psychological and spiritual dimensions. Obviously, homelessness involves lacking shelter, but when persons of financial means and social support lose their homes unexpectedly to natural disasters, they typically can replace them and quickly exit from a homeless situation. Extreme poverty linked to this lack of housing then is a crucial feature.\textsuperscript{26} Loss, too, is central to defining homelessness. Homelessness is an experience

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{24} Joanne Passaro, \textit{The Unequal Homeless: Men on the Streets, Women in Their Place} (New York: Routledge, 1996), 23.  


\textsuperscript{26} There are different understandings of absolute or extreme poverty. For example, Jeffery Sachs argues only persons in third world countries can be considered living in extreme poverty. For Sachs, homeless persons in the United States, because of their privileges in living in a first world nation, are relatively poor, that is poor in relation to the nation’s wealth and resources. See Jeffery Sachs, \textit{The End of Poverty} (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 20-1. While I understand Sach’s view for his purposes of dealing with worldwide poverty, I think this term, as it is defined by sociologist Doug Timmer}
of profound loss—to lose your home is to lose your place on a variety of levels. The homeless are confronted with a loss of freedoms and constraints (spatial, organizational, political, and moral) that can impinge upon their daily routines and activities for survival.\textsuperscript{27} Homelessness is a loss of a safe place. If trauma occurs when one loses the sense of having a safe place to retreat to for dealing with frightening emotions and experiences, then homelessness with its exposure to multiple stressors and sorts of violence can be characterized as an acute trauma that taxes a person’s mental, physical, and psychological resources. Homelessness can entail losing your sense of humanity, your place of residence, your space of personal privacy, and your belonging to some kin and community that can act as a reference point.

If there is one defining commonality among the homeless and the variety of ways they come to and experience it, it is a loss of feeling in-place. Sociologist James Wright recognizes this widespread out-of-place quality and describes it as “a shared marginalization somewhere ‘out there’ beyond the normative middle-class pale.”\textsuperscript{28} Thus, one of the many losses inherent to homelessness is the loss of full acceptance among other humans: “People become homeless because they are socially constructed as

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unworthy of the rights of citizenship that others enjoy, because their very being is defined as an existence at the economic, social, cultural, or political fringe.” 29 This out-of-place quality of homelessness comes through the processes of stigmatization and exclusion that mark a homeless person as dis-graceful. In order to fully explore this out-of-placeness of the homeless, it is necessary to examine the concepts of stigma and shame.

Stigma: A state of dis-grace

Given my assertion of the influence of stigma and shame in shaping spiritualities of the homeless and their bodily practices in social relations, research on stigma in general and associated with homelessness in particular as well as research on shame provide important intellectual background. I do not want to force a reading of stigma and shame onto my analysis, nor do I want to ignore such goods as strength, joy, and gratitude. However, because research suggests the public negatively stereotypes the homeless as dangerous or irresponsible (Link et al. 1995) and stigmatize the homeless more severely than the poor (Phelan et al. 1997), these categories aid in my analysis.

Erving Goffman’s classic Stigma (1963) traces the modern notion of stigma to the ancient Greek culture where a person was externally marked as a criminal or blemished person to be avoided. Goffman defines stigma as an identity spoiled by undesirable differences. The spoiled identity disqualifies a person both “from full social acceptance” among “normals” since normals have reduced the stigmatized in their minds from a

29 Ibid. Let me add, this is not to say that even those on the fringe cannot form some kind of community and this possibility for community and positive social bonds should not be overlooked.
“whole” person. Importantly, Goffman sees stigma not as a person’s physical or personal attributes but as “a language of relationships” between the stereotype and attribute deemed discrediting by society (5). Thus, Goffman identifies that the stigma originates not in persons but in “perspectives” of both the normal and the stigmatized as they engage one another in a “pervasive two-role social process” (138). These “perspectives” are generated by “mixed contacts,” whereby the normals and stigmatized encounter one another directly in conversation or simply by being in one another’s immediate vicinity (12). Anticipating mixed contacts can lead both normals and the stigmatized “to arrange life so as to avoid them” (12). Goffman concludes that normals avoid mixed contacts out of discomfort at the awareness of the differences and may resort to a “non-person” strategy, whereby they ignore the stigmatized (18). As for the stigmatized, they avoid mixed contacts because they are “intimately alive” to their stigma and may feel uncertain of how they will be received or do not want to be “‘on’” in the sense of feeling “self-conscious and calculating the impression he is making” (7-8, 14-5). Goffman’s understanding of stigma as a social construct of identity is relevant for this project because one common aspect of the homeless experience is that of stigma and discredited identities. Stigmas do not originate in the homeless person but emerge from their relationships with normals, or the non-homeless, whose negative perceptions of them, be it fear or discomfort of the other, then do not give them a place to appear as fully human.

Since Goffman’s ground-breaking work, stigma literature has grown to deal with diverse populations: wheelchair users, women in public places, fat bodies and physical appearances deemed abnormal, ‘dirty’ work with those stigmatized or with spaces deemed trashy, and the mentally ill.31 I mention these particular ones because this project connects in several ways to them, from degrading interactions between the stigmatized and normals in public spaces to concealment and displacement of the stigmatized to shameful or unfair treatment from family and service providers on whom they depend for help. Recent sociological research on homelessness has explored stigma and has become its own subject in literature reviews.32 A significant finding among studies on stigma and homelessness is that homelessness can interact or overlap with other stigmatizing statuses such as mental illness or poverty, past jail records and criminal behavior, and race.33


32 Emily Meanwell, “Experiencing Homelessness: A Review of Recent Literature,” Sociology 6, no. 1 (2012): 74. Also, see Michele Alexander’s The New Jim Crow which analyzes the prison system and race’s impact on it. Her analysis illustrates how homelessness interacts with other stigmatizing and shaming statuses such as race and incarceration as blacks with a prison label are more vulnerable to falling into homelessness. Alexander, The New Jim Crow (New York: New Press, 2012), 17-18, 141-8, 161-173.

Research shows that the public sympathizes some with the plight of the homeless and realizes structural conditions cause it (Phelan et al. 1997), but studies also suggest that the public sees the homeless as dangerous, undesirable, lazy, and irresponsible. Able-bodied homeless individuals are regarded as the “non-deserving poor” because they violate norms about work. People already stigmatize the poor in ways influenced by their own social locations: white working class men tend to blame the nonworking poor for lacking “stick-to-it-ness” and morals that then validates their own disciplined selves while middle class and elite whites tend to be disgusted by the poor for violating manners and taste. People stigmatize homelessness more than poverty and at about the same level of mental illness (Phelan et al. 1997). Even if people are sympathetic, they do not always act on it to support policies that could ameliorate structural problems (Snow and Mulcahy 2001).

The homeless are aware of the public’s negative attitudes and feel it in their exchanges with the non-homeless as well as each other. The homeless, by virtue of

their being forced to spend more time outside in public space, must contend with two kinds of social psychological assaults (intended or not) that can strengthen the stigma associated with homelessness.\textsuperscript{38} The first is “negative attention” in the form of degradation rituals and humiliations ranging from staring to verbal abuses (taunting, name calling) to other callous interactions. The second is “attention deprivation.” This can become a habituated response taking the form of avoidance rituals such as averting one’s eyes, hurriedly passing by, or crossing the street. With this latter response, the homeless don’t suffer from attention to their “defiled status” but from being routinely avoided as they are regarded as unworthy of attention.\textsuperscript{39}

Homeless responses to stigma and their stigma management have been studied. Researchers have used Goffman’s concepts to explore how the homelessness encounter and manage stigma in the following populations: street persons (Anderson, Snow and Cress 1994; Snow and Anderson 1993), panhandlers (Lankenau 1999), homeless men with AIDS, homeless youth, and homeless mothers on welfare.\textsuperscript{40} A common theme


\textsuperscript{39} Anderson et al, “Negotiating the Public Realm,” 124-15.

among them is that stigmatization is constructed and reinforced spatially through containing the daily routines and life paths of the homeless. Examples of socio-spatial stigma include “Not In My Backyard” reactions (Takahashi 1998, 2002), repeated forced relocations of undesirable shelters, the relegation of the homeless to shadow work, and quality of life ordinances that define normal behaviors—eating, drinking, sleeping, washing—as illegal because they occur in downtown public spaces. Sociospatial boundaries have been conceptualized as transgression whereby the homeless are seen by the public as rule breakers. They are “‘people-out-of-place’—a human form of litter” in a city’s cohesive in-place for the elite and middle class.

Stigma may derive from and be a consequence of social and structural forces, but management of it happens at the interpersonal level. Findings show that the homeless do identity work where they use talking strategies to “salvage the self” that include distancing from and embracing their homeless identity as well as fictive storytelling, a practice where the homeless make up and tell narratives that cast themselves or their pasts in a positive light (Snow and Anderson 1987, 1993). Studies have identified other coping strategies such as passing and forging friendships to posturing and collective action (Anderson et al 1994; Roschelle and Kaufman 2004). These are strategies utilized

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by different groups across age and gender.

Despite widespread stigmatization, a public space can provide the homeless with opportunities to successfully carve out a meaningful place for themselves as they reach out to and gain limited support and positive attention from non-homeless persons.\textsuperscript{43} Qualitative research with the homeless has explored their meaning of hope in the face of adversity and found that hope is weakened through social isolation and dehumanizing responses and strengthened conversely through caring connections and respectful treatment.\textsuperscript{44} One study of 29 homeless persons in a single adult shelter drew on in depth interviews to investigate homelessness and self identity and found that in coping with a Devalued Self (a stigmatized identity described with problems such as social isolation and alienation), one way homeless persons resist their current homeless identity is to focus on their Present Self, an identity based on their current situation where they describe themselves as resourceful, honest, kind, generous and proud survivors. Such findings would seem to show that the homeless can foster a future self focused on hope.\textsuperscript{45} Finally, a study wanting to identify perceptions of events that validate or invalidate dignity and their impact on homeless persons found events invalidating and validating dignity (Partis 2003). Some of those identified as validating dignity—being treated as an


opportunities in the community—suggest that interpersonal relations is as important as ready access to material resources. I will return to these dignity and non-dignity events found by Partis for my discussion of the three homeless social worlds at Downtown Presbyterian Church when I evaluate their giving the displaced a place to appear fully human.

I have provided this review of stigma literature because stigma can be a significant feature of the homeless person’s experience of displacement at a variety of levels (displacement from power, family support, work, etc…) and being treated as less than human. Goffman begins *Stigma* by reminding his reader that Christians added layers of metaphor to this term including a reference to “bodily signs of holy grace that took the form of eruptive blossoms on the skin” (2). Today, stigmas attached to the homeless are signs of personal and social disgrace. As Coyote’s story illustrated at the beginning of my introduction, the homeless may see themselves and be seen by others in terms of their spoiled identity rather than being made in the image of God and fully Beloved. Spiritually, stigma can be a state of dis-grace for the homeless whose out-of-placeness is about as anti-graced or dis-graced as one can get. Shame is a consequential feeling of stigma or dis-grace, so I now turn to shame’s relationship with stigma, its meaning and traits, and relevant treatment of it in psychological and theological scholarship.

*Feeling dis-grace: Shame and its Relationship to Stigma*

Since one feature of stigma is its shared knowledge being understood even by the targets of stigmatized attitudes and behaviors, shame can be an internalized reaction to or
emotional consequence of stigma. That is, the very act of stigmatization can induce shame in a person. Shame is a negative emotion that arises when an individual experiences failure according to personal and/or social standards, feels responsible for the failure, and believes the failure reflects self-inadequacy. It is the self-realization of being deficient in a way where adequacy was expected. Central to both stigma and shame is the idea of perceived self-responsibility and self-blame for failure. Shame’s self-consciousness about one’s whole self or personhood being discredited relates to stigma’s global effect. Goffman’s very term, spoiled identity, shows how a stigma can become the defining feature of a person’s self and encompass it, be it “the fat lady,” “the Down’s child,” “the old man,” or “the homeless bum.” Shame characteristically involves a desire to hide or disappear from exposure that is a response Goffman saw the stigmatized have to mixed contact with normals. The term “self stigmatizing” is sometimes used as a synonym for shame to indicate an individual accepting a stigma and its negative aspects as reflecting her/his damaged self.

Extreme poverty can do much to exacerbate a sense of inferiority or powerlessness that can in turn nurture a sense of inner shame. Internalized shame can contribute to the pathway to becoming and remaining homeless, and it can factor into a homeless person’s encounters with violence. Research has found among the homeless

higher levels of shame are associated with childhood trauma and an increased tendency to engage in maladaptive behaviors such as escaping from unwanted emotions and thoughts by avoiding people.48 Besides acting as an underlying mechanism in a person’s homeless status, shame can also factor into the physical and sexual violence that the homeless may be victims to or instigators of with street and shelter life or incarceration. Criminal psychiatrist James Gilligan has written about shame being the most primary variable in the outbreak of violence. He understands violence as a shamed person’s cry for acknowledgement as worthy of self respect: “the basic psychological motive, or cause, of violent behavior, is to ward off or eliminate the feeling of shame or eliminate the feeling of shame or humiliation…and replace it with its opposite, the feeling of pride.”49 Gilligan’s work on violence and shame’s role in it is helpful for thinking about the homeless. Their vulnerable state on the streets and in shelters can intensify shame and increase occurrences of aggression and conflict stemming from losing and saving face.

Research shows how stigma and shame are linked and gendered in both perceptions of the public and of the poor themselves. One study of predominantly white middle class university students found that when they looked at ads of poor women asking for and receiving charity, they preferred for the poor women in the ads to express

48 Rebecca Barrett, “Experiential Avoidance: Associations with Childhood Trauma, Internalised Shame, Psychopathology and Maladaptive Behaviours” (PhD diss, University of Southampton School of Psychology, 2010).
shame. This suggests that the non-homeless expect the poor to accept the blame for their poverty. It also implies gender has a role in shaping the public’s attitude toward the poor, for they expect poor women to avoid anger and express “appropriate” emotions like deference in order to be rewarded by those in power. For poor men, failing to meet a gender ideal that indicates social worth can promote shame. While some homeless men report that homelessness has not diminished their masculinity and they do not feel ashamed of having dominant middle class masculinity trappings stripped from them (Liu 2006), others report feeling that rejecting or losing the breadwinner role has made them somehow lose the very stuff of maleness (Passaro 1996, 47-8). It seems then that shame can factor into a person’s experience of poverty and homelessness and that this experience is gendered.

Scholars in pastoral theology have asserted that Christians by and large have overemphasized guilt, which has obscured shame and its centrality to both theology and practice. Donald Capps is one who has argued for dealing more with shame in theology: “Christian theology has well-developed theologies of guilt, while the majority of its constituency is struggling with debilitating, demoralizing, and even dehumanizing effects of shame.” Unlike guilt where a person feels badly for doing a bad thing, in shame, a person feels his or herself embodies the bad and is bad. Capps says, “we perform guilty


actions, but we are our shame.” Guilt can be a healthy response in the sense of accountability; in the context of practicing forgiveness and reconciliation, it can motivate persons toward confession and resolution of interpersonal problems. In contrast, shame is harmful in its sense of worthlessness and self-hatred, and it is more likely to trigger self-protective responses for hiding one’s offense or helping the shame-prone individual feel more powerful or appear competent or good.

Some pastoral theologians have recognized shame as a situation that Christianity often underwrites and sometimes creates. Stephen Pattison argues that particular images, symbols, and biblical narratives about God (perfect purity, wholly other, unbiddable absence, king with honor, etc.) have the power to engender feelings of unwantedness, unlovability, defilement, and powerlessness. Pattison also contends that shame can be unintentionally promoted for some in Christian worship through language in hymns and liturgies that evoke defilement such as baptism (emphasizing the need to acquire a new clean identity in Christ) and the Eucharist (stressing who is worthy to come to the table and so excluding others). In the context of pastoral care with women shamed through child and sexual abuse, Nancy Ramsey has recognized that their shame has destroyed trust and she questions the helpfulness of traditional powerful male images of the divine as well as critiques traditional Christian attitudes of disgust toward bodies and

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If shame has been identified as a problem in Christian practice and theology, some pastoral theologians also explore the tradition to see how shame can be transformed for wholeness and union with the divine. Jill McNish, in her theology of shame, argues for Christians to remember that shame is at the center of the Christian story. It appears throughout the gospels in the people to whom Jesus ministered as well as in the shape of his own life—being born under the shameful shroud of illegitimacy—and his death of a criminal’s execution. As McNish says plainly, “Christianity literally had its birth on an altar of shame.” She contends that when shame is honestly confronted, it has the potential to draw us closer to God. McNish encourages Christians today to look to their spiritual tradition to see how past figures from Augustine and Luther to Teresa of Avila and Simone Weil have described their experiences with shame as interfering with their union with God and the subsequent transformation of it. Listening to these different voices on shame is important, for as I hope to show in this project, understandings of shame can shape how the homeless see themselves in relation to God. They can also shape how sin and the human condition are viewed in the context of homelessness.

Filling a Gap in Theological and Sociological Literature

This project addresses a significant gap in knowledge. Susan Crawford Sullivan rightly pointed out in her recent ethnography of mothers on welfare that despite the fact

that research has showed religion can help during stressful times and that religious institutions and groups are well-represented in caring for the homeless, most existing sociological research on poverty has ignored the lived faith of poor persons.\textsuperscript{58} This is true for research on the homeless as well in both sociology and theology. In sociology, ethnographies on street life offer little to no attention to the spiritualities of homeless persons. Given the prevalence of homelessness and scant ethnographical attention to the homeless person’s lived faith in theological literature, my project fills a lacuna in current scholarship.

Though some religious scholars and theologians have explored homelessness, they have undertaken virtually no sustained ethnographic investigation of homeless persons’ lived faith in a particular ecclesial context. There is a variety of theological literature, some meant for academics, others aimed at clergy (by prescribing practices of “good” models of churches caring for the homeless\textsuperscript{59}) or at congregations (by offering inspirational literature of Christians who have been changed by their encounters with the homeless\textsuperscript{60}), but the literature does not employ ethnography. New Testament theology offers work on Jesus the stranger as an ethical blueprint for homelessness.\textsuperscript{61} Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemmann broaches this topic in his call on pastors to

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\begin{footnotes}{59} An example would be Troy Anderson, “A City of Angels for the Homeless: How Church in the Nation’s Capitol is Responding” \textit{Christianity Today}, 53 (6) 2009. 44-47.
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\begin{footnotes}{60} An example would be Ron Hall & Moore, Denver, \textit{Same Kind of Different As Me} (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2006).
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preach on texts about the “practice of homefulness” that is willed by God.  

Pastoral theology has explored how to care for the homeless at shelters, offered guides to urban ministry, and has investigated how a church is shaped by its liturgy to serve the homeless. A recent book by an Anglican priest and theologian does a theological exploration of British homeless persons and through their interviews, constructs a theology of a homeless Triune God who shares stories and provides hope, however, it does not explore issues of stigma and shame nor does it study the religious practices of homeless persons.

In homiletics and theological ethics, Charles Campbell and Peter Gathje have explored homelessness in the context of the Open Door Community: Campbell calls for the need to perform and interpret scripture in city streets while Gathje focuses on the practices of the Open Door volunteers and founders, and his later study of power dynamics shows how tensions emerge in trying to share power across differences within a Christian community. Scholars also have done historical work on the Christian

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62 Walter Brueggemann, “Practice of Homefulness,” *Journal for Preachers* 15 (1992): 7-22. By this, Brueggemann means that Yahweh is a particular social practice or mode of social relation (caring for the poor) and enacting that practice is to know Yahweh.


64 Michael Christensen, *A Call for Compassion: City Streets City People* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988).


67 Chuck Campbell and Stanley Saunders, *Word on the Street: Performing the Scriptures in the Urban Context* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2000); Peter Gathje,
response to a fear of poverty and the beggar’s economy of gift-giving as well as a contemporary analysis and critique of Christian responses to homelessness not offering enough “prophetic disruption.” Other theological ethicists have explored homelessness as a North American cultural phenomenon. Stephen Bouma-Prediger and Brian Walsh’s theology of home gives some attention to socio-economic homelessness as it investigates ecological, postmodern, and consumer displacement. Willis Jenkins’ work has overlapped with Bouma-Prediger and Walsh in his theological ethic of a neighborhood and a geographical reflection on Christian responses to the homeless. This literature review shows a void in theological studies where there has been little to no sustained ethnographic work that listens to and then tells the faith experiences of actual homeless persons involved in a church’s social worlds of care and deals with issues of stigma and shame.

Sociological ethnographies of street life have more commonly focused on a particular homeless population and the ways that they survive and maintain (or don’t maintain) relationships. They have included cultural analyses of homelessness such as women in homeless shelters in Baltimore and Washington, D.C.; homeless men in the Midwest who remain loners or form their own fictive kinships; mentally ill street persons

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in a Boston shelter; homeless youth in New York City; and, heroin addicts in San Francisco. Mostly, lived faith is not a topic sought out in interview questions nor is it an issue that, even when it emerges, gets sustained exploration. The role of faith is conspicuously absent in the two studies of homeless youth and of homeless men (Save the last page of the latter study where suddenly God is mentioned as reported as the most important thing in the lives of some of the men interviewed—taken at face value, that surely might hint at the possibilities here to mine for research.) Religion has gotten more treatment when sociological ethnographies deal peripherally with the homeless and more directly with their religiously based caregivers, as illustrated in Rebecca Allahyri’s ethnography comparing the care given by volunteers at Loaves and Fishes and the Salvation Army. Similarly, Damian Williams’ ethnography of homeless men in Nashville’s Lafayette District or “organized ghetto” includes an exploration of how religious beliefs of two faith-based shelters (the Catholic A Room in the Inn and the fundamentalist evangelical conservative Nashville Rescue Mission) shape the care the homeless receive; he focuses more on the managerial role of religious caregivers who structure the lives of homeless men into daily routines and, ironically, work with

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neighborhood day labor agencies exploiting their clients. While most of the aforementioned studies touch upon the role of faith for homeless persons, they do not give it serious consideration, but Bourgois and Schonberg’s study of the heroin addicts may offer the most vivid glimpses.

*Righteous Dopefiend*, perhaps the most well written and gripping ethnography among this group, was also the most painful to read because it incorporated raw photos of the subjects including addicts shooting up drugs and being hospitalized from overdoses. From twelve years of fieldwork among twenty or so homeless heroin addicts, Bourgois and Schonberg discovered a “moral economy of sharing” in which the homeless addicts formed networks of companions to generate money for the purchases of heroin necessary to stave off withdrawal (6). Working and stealing together as well as living together in racially segregated camps results in what the ethnographers call a “community of addicted bodies” that centers on their never-ending search for that next high structuring their daily routines (92-3).

A daughter of Billy, one of the addicts, invited him to a church service one Sunday and he brings his fellow campers. Bourgois’ study is the only one here to observe the homeless at a church service and he makes some insightful observations in their preparations for church, the church service, and the time immediately after church. However, the reader is left wondering what the homeless addicts had to say about all of this in relation to their own faith (260-261). When Bourgois notes that their preparations

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73 Damian Williams. “Down and Out in Music City: The Urban Structuralization of Homelessness” (PhD Diss, Vanderbilt University, 2010).
include passing around clothes to smell which one passes as least offensive, it is an opportunity to investigate what smells they associate with church, if having dirty clothes ever keeps them from attending church, and how helpful their past church experience (the people, the pastor, the singing, the bible reading, etc…) were to them. When Bourgois observes them debating whether or not to use drugs before and after church and one decides it is permissible because they are not in the church building itself, their conversation presents an opening to hear more from them on where they feel close to or far from God particularly in their daily search for and use of drugs and what they imagine God thinks about their drug use and homelessness. One of the few women in this group, Tina, expresses excitement about going to church “to exorcise the devil from her life” (260) and then after a failed attempt at healing, she is healed by the pastor with a slaying of the Spirit and speaking in tongues. Tina could be asked among other things was it helpful, how her body felt when she was being exorcised, what she understood was being exorcised, and where else she feels God’s Spirit and prays (or why she does not) in her daily life centered on scraping together money for heroin fixes. Much is left unexplored here from the homeless addicts’ perspectives that could tell us about their past and present spiritual beliefs and practices.

Toward the end of this book, when many of the addicts are dying, we see some of them struggling with the loss of fellow companions. For instance, after Carter overdoses, his drug partners attend his funeral at his family’s church and Bourgois recounts the pastor’s fiery sermon, full of condemnations including a denouncement of drugs (293). However, we do not hear what Carter’s friends think of the pastor and his sermon or the
funeral. We do find out that Tina (who had a romantic relationship with Carter) builds a shrine to him in her lean-to by a dumpster and that another homeless woman who lost three husbands to overdoses, prepares her for the funeral by painting her nails (292).

Such observed moments present opportunities to ask this homeless woman if their actions (of care and of making a shrine) are expressions of their faith. Does Tina considers this shrine a sacred space and how so? Another scene from this study has a corresponding photo showing Petey, unconscious and hooked up to life support machines. His old drug-running partners are cradling his head and comforting one another. Hank prays aloud, “Everybody is rooting for you. Lord, please protect our Petey” (231). We do not get an exploration here of their prayers, how they understand who God is, and if they feel close to God in their community. We have the possibility for a reflection from the ethnographers on this one aspect of their community—caring for another in the process of dying—that has been explored by scholars as an important spiritual practice.74

Like this last scene with Petey’s dying in Righteous Dopefiend, some of the other ethnographies observe the homeless potentially engaging in spiritual practices or talking about them in ways that suggest their faith offers support, community building, and meaning making. Liebow observes that in shelter life, women will use religion in conversations as a way to connect with one another (Is that woman’s masturbation both a sin and sickness, according to the bible? Do you think we are living in the times of Revelation? Do you like that television evangelist?) as well as with shelter staff who

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they hope will treat them more as equals (170-172). Often the treatment of the issue of faith as support is superficial. For instance, while bible reading is noted as a mode of escape from stress and noise (Desjarlais 1997, 6) and the bible, religious holiday cards and pictures, music tapes of hymns, and religious jewelry are mentioned among the baggage that homeless women carry, (Russell 1991, 74-5; Liebow 1995, 30-5), we do not hear the homeless telling in their own words any specific life stories behind these sacred things (if, indeed, they are held sacred), which Bible stories speak to them, if these things give them hope, or how their bodies feel when they recall memories as they read or sing or look at the cards or when they wear their religious jewelry. When a homeless addict Sonny regularly visits a cemetery to talk to his father and son (Bourgois 2009, 192), the ethnography leaves uninvestigated if he is practicing his faith and feeling a spiritual connection to both God and family in what may be a sacred and safe place for him. He does not do drugs in the cemetery space (that we know of), and this might be worth exploring for connections to his faith. Finally, opportunities to reflect on where religion gives the homeless a sense of authority or power, even if not grounded in reality, go unnoticed: a woman will not believe her doctor’s word that she has cancer because God continues to tell her that she is healthy (Desjarlais 1997, 197) and another refuses to accept a judge’s order that she can not have her car, house, or children and says even in the shelter that is only to be decided by God (Liebow 1995, 19).

Lastly, examples are given that suggest faith does not help to change a homeless person’s hard times or that it may not be morally good, but such examples are not discussed in their significance. For instance, as Liebow addresses the struggle of
homeless women to find employment, she discovers that a woman fasts and prays for a job and then cries when she does not get it (168). We do not know if she thinks God let her down or if she thinks she did not hold up her end of a bargain made with God. We do not know why she fasted, where she learned it, or how she feels when she fasts. In another place, Liebow is dealing with racial tensions in the shelter when she shares a black homeless woman’s declaration that she does not want to go to heaven because whites own religion in this world and will own heaven in the next (194). Liebow quickly moves on, so we are left asking, where is she free to be in a sacred space that she as a black woman “owns”? How does her body feel in such spaces? Can she “own” such space in the shelter services and bible studies?

The question then arises: Why do these studies miss these opportunities to delve into the spiritual beliefs and practices of the homeless? In leaving out or skimming over the lived faith of the homeless, they may or may not be entirely accurate in their portrayals of the experiences of homelessness. It seems that these researchers are blind, intentionally and unintentionally, to the theological aspects of their fieldwork. Let me say, even as I offer this critique of their blindness, I acknowledge the limits of my own approach. Certainly, any perspective including mine will be limited, but it is important that we pursue such theological questions that emerge. I corresponded with some of these researchers (as well as those from sociological studies on homelessness and stigma where there is no treatment of their lived faith). A few replied that they had not considered this topic, were not seeking it out, and the homeless did not bring it up—but, as I hope to have shown, might not their subjects have already been “bringing it up” right
before them in a variety of ways?

Intentionally, they may have a disregard for drawing on theology for a sociological project because structuring it out of their accounts of the homeless is the norm in their academic guild. Flannagan suggests that sociologists largely resist using and exploring theology in their research because faith implies a responsibility to judge and exclude that is not suited for a sociologist’s inclusive orientation and values.75 Flannagan also argues that sociologists want to work “in post-theological lanes” and deem spiritual matters to be the otherworldly stuff of myth and superstition—stuff not “sober” enough for their own work (433). As such, possibly many of these ethnographers do not accurately portray the experiences of homeless persons because of their biases about the theological.

Robert Wuthnow blames this oversight of spirituality in sociological studies on sociologists failing to consider more broadly where and how people live out their faith.76 Wuthnow contends that they miss spiritual beliefs and practices in their subjects’ lives simply because of a more outdated way of looking at faith as equivalent to established religious institutions and memberships in them and conformity to tradition. Wanting to move beyond an approach to faith issues that reduces religion to institutional symbols, rituals, and structures is precisely why Marla Frederick says she came to her own project

on the spirituality of low-income women. As such, perhaps these researchers on the homeless are unintentional in their missing lived faith in homeless life. They may assume a congregation is the main place (and, granted it is an important place) where persons seek to express or deepen their spirituality and they may also assume that because they are neither starting with faith communities nor shelter chapel services in their ethnographies to observe homeless life and because the homeless (save Bourgois’ study) do not attend church services, spirituality and religion is outside of their studies’ scopes. They then neglect seriously exploring the role of faith for the homeless when opportunities in their fieldwork arise to ask the homeless more about their conversations and activities.

These scholars miss what practical theology can and should investigate in research with the use of sociological methods. According to Hans Schilderman, one task of practical theology includes looking closely at religious activities and practices that happen in ordinary human life and then how persons use them to “bestow life with transcendent meaning.” Practical theology should also function to see where religious traditions matters for social issues and problems (such as homelessness) as well as its “normative relevance” for investigating how we humans make meaning (such as the hard times and causes of homelessness), find our identities (such as negotiating a homeless identity that can be linked to stigma and shame), and judge core values (such as the

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public’s attitudes toward the poor that create stigma and what the Christian tradition says
to such social attitudes even as it is found within congregations and individual
Christians).\(^79\) In a word, practical theology would be valued added to these social
ethnographies of the homeless.

Social scientists have not deeply explored how the homeless draw on their faith to
understand their circumstances and how their faith impacts and appears in their daily life
and relationships. However, remarkable ethnographies about poverty and faith include
Susan Crawford Sullivan’s study of mothers on welfare in Boston and Marla Frederick’s
work on the spiritual lives of poor black women in rural North Carolina. Sullivan
analyzes how mothers turn to their faith to make sense of their poverty as well as their
parenting and low-wage employment. Frederick’s ethnographic research focuses on the
spiritual practices of women from tithing and intimate relationships to gratitude and
righteous indignation, and it deals with the role of religion for the women personally and
politically. Sullivan and Frederick point out how lived religion can support and constrict
the poor. They also reject a dichotomy between religion either being used to
accommodate or resist oppressive political and social powers which is important for my
project because often the homeless I interviewed and observed were using their faith in
personal ways and were disconnected not just from a faith community but also from
activist organizations. Also, they recognize both the scholarly debates on definitions of
and distinctions between religion and spirituality and the validity of spirituality as a

\(^{79}\) Schilderman, “Quantitative Method,” 124.
concept for scholarly inquiry.\textsuperscript{80} Thus, these ethnographies of the lived religion of poor persons will be helpful conversation partners throughout this project.

In terms of their lived religion, the homeless seem to be an understudied group in sociological ethnographies. I hope that my project, in better understanding the spiritualities of the displaced and their narratives and practices of survival, hope, and loss, will contribute to the larger discourse of practical theology as well as help caregivers of the homeless. I also hope that it will benefit the growing body of scholarship done by historians of American Christianity (Robert Orsi 1996; Marie Griffith 2000; Diana Butler Bass 2006), sociologists of religion (Courtney Bender 2003; Meredith McGuire 2008; Frederick 2003; Sullivan 2012) and pastoral theologians (Susan Dunlap 2009; Dorothy Bass 2010) and many others whose work dovetails in studying how people practice religion in their daily lives both connected to and outside of faith institutions—that is, “lived religion” or “everyday religion” or “spirituality.”

*Listening to the Homeless: Ethnography from Sociology and Theology*

My most crucial “texts” are the witnesses of homeless persons. For this significant work, my project relied heavily on ethnographic tools as I observed, listened to, experienced, and interpreted this contemporary situation. For about a year, I attended the Wednesday worship services for the homeless and the Living Room meetings (and some of their day retreats). I went to some *Contributor* vendor orientations and paper release meetings, but most of my data on the vendors came from interviews. From sociology, I have used an empirical approach, the situational analysis of social worlds

\textsuperscript{80} Sullivan, *Living Faith*, 4-5, 24-26 and Frederick *Between Sundays*, 10-18.
that involves qualitative rather than quantitative research.\textsuperscript{81} Contributor vendors, the Living Room support group, or the weekly worship service—none of these alone are the story. Rather, the entire web of them and especially the homeless individuals within and moving across them—that is the story.

I am beginning with certain framings, such as situational analysis, relative to my theological norms and interests that connect to my interviews. Situational analysis assumes all human beings and knowledges are situated, and it aims to go beyond the knowing agent to address the social worlds in which the subject is engaged. Two unique features of situational analysis are that it requires analysis to begin as soon as there is data and it uses a theoretical sampling (that is, the sampling is driven by emerging theoretical concerns and the saturation of patterns or categories). Its outcome should be a thick analysis (comparable to what Clifford Geertz in his \textit{Interpretation of Culture} called a “thick description”) of the elements and their relations within a situation. Analyzing data with this method involves mapping out social worlds—sites of action and their collective actors—their formations and the relationships within them, across them, and beyond them to the larger arenas that the social worlds inhabit. Also included in mapping are the researcher’s own assumptions as well as naming any “sites of silence,” or what Clarke

\textsuperscript{81} Situational analysis supplements and revises basic grounded theory (put forth in the 1960’s by Glasser and Strauss) from a postmodern perspective. Grounded theory uses open coding of data word by word and gives codes to phenomena. Related codes are put together into categories then integrated into an analysis. Using the aforementioned grounded theory and situational analysis approach, I analyzed my data as I collected it with visual mapping to identify patterns of conversational themes and interactions. Adele Clarke, \textit{Situational Analysis: Grounded Theory after the Postmodern Turn} (Thousand Oaks: Sage Press, 2005), xxi-xxxiii, 83-140.
calls the 1,000 pound gorilla no one wants to mention (85). With situational analysis, I can enter an arena (DPC) and ask questions about the overlapping social worlds (the three homeless ministries/organizations) and the homeless persons within them. A situational analysis of social worlds helped me to explore this web of homeless social worlds connected through one church as well as the bodies, spiritual practices, and knowledges of street persons living within this web.

My method is theological by virtue of its attention to more fully understanding lived faith. As I read this contemporary situation and its messy practices, my assessment of which practices are better and which are worse is theological. To be theological means I have a certain normative way of reading the activities and practices of the homeless and their social worlds at DPC and evaluate what is better and what is worse. My normative evaluation of God’s presence or wisdom found in redemptive forms of spirituality is made on the basis of nurturing or increasing agency as well as the creation of a space for the homeless to feel honored as created in the image of God. As distinctions in my project arise between what the homeless call spiritual and what I interpret as spiritual based on my normative evaluation, I will explicitly name those distinctions.

Ethnography has been called a theological act in its commitment to empathetic listening that can be a kind of witnessing; its commitment to the incarnation in privileging the wisdom found in embodied knowing; its revelation of the ambiguous reality of Christian communities; and, its role in discernment of God’s presence in contemporary situations.82 Ethnography is attentively studying and then learning from a

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82 Christen Scharen & Anna Marie Vigen, eds. *Ethnography as Christian Theology and*
people with the aim “to understand what God, human relationships, and the world look like from their perspective.”83 Although ethnography has the unequal “researcher” and “subject” roles, participation-observation has an “inherently anti-institutional transgressive potential” since it requires academicians to leave the university ivory tower and attempt breaking cultural segregated boundaries and engaging with the marginalized (Bourgois 2009, 14). This project aims to do this with the homeless and so “to take them seriously as a source of wisdom.”84 Thus, I adopted the qualitative method to bring the stories of unheard persons to the center of theological scholarly conversations. Such a move can be redemptive in its unsettling of the normally privileged theoretical and theological material that still remains in the conversation but not at the expense of losing the particular real life stories of persons of faith. I aim to do this here in my own project.

As ethnography places a high premium on sensitive listening, it can be a significant pastoral practice.85 In taking on the role as listener, theologians who employ ethnography with marginalized populations allow the subjects to speak for themselves and this seemed to benefit many subjects. Numerous times the homeless expressed gratitude for my wanting their stories and for their having a chance to share it. A few shared that it helped them figure some things out about their life. In that, I heard telling

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83 Scharen and Vigen, Ethnography as Christian Theology, 16.
84 Ibid.
85 John Patton describes the pastor as a “mini-ethnographer” and Mary Moschella Clark suggests ethnography is a kind of pastoral care in its emphasis on listening to and sharing narratives that give our lives meaning. Patton, Pastoral Care in Context (Louisville: Westminster Knox Press 1993), 43-45; Moschella Clark, Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2008), 4.
their story contributed to their making some meaning in their lives. A portion of the subjects called their interviews a testimony. They may come from religious traditions (not uncommon in the American South) where testimony is a key part of the spiritual life, and so the interview became for them a space where I played the role of witness as they testified to God’s work in their lives and proclaimed their faith in the midst of trials and victories. Interviews also became a safe space for some to retell hard times and as such, revisiting them might have provided some healing. A few of those interviewed were proud of their endurance of hard times and saw the interview and possible publication of some of their story as affirming their resilience and providing them with a chance to teach a church about how to care for the homeless or pass along their own lessons from street life to those in need. I was often admonished to quickly finish this and get their stories “out there.” Thus, this method can be empowering as it offers a voice to the marginalized and a sense of accomplishment and meaning even as it helped me work toward a more nuanced understanding of spirituality.

While I discovered the benefits to using ethnography were many, I also encountered limitations and challenges. I did find myself wanting the time and resources to listen to more persons. Honestly, even a year or so of time with these people felt short to me in how much of their histories I heard. As an amateur ethnographer, I confess that my interpretations of observed situations could be disputed. I also confess that making any generalizations out of this study and even figuring out what kind of generalizations are possible is a real challenge. I was concerned about how my own role was perceived at different times by both the homeless and the leaders of the different social worlds: as a
member of DPC, a Living Room leader, a street paper staffer, a social service agency employee, a therapist, or an alternative pastor leader for the worship service.

At times balancing the dual roles of participant-observer was awkward. Occasionally, I got wary or disapproving looks in the worship service when I was taking notes during the prayer or sermon. (Then again, I also got nods of approval that I understood as applauding my obedience as a disciple.) I did not get these looks in the street paper meetings where there was a lot of activity to distract from my observations. I also did not get them in the Living Room because I took on the needed role of transcriber and recapping all responses at the end. Often in the Living Room, I knew that I was expected to share, but I quietly worried that sharing my concerns and joys as a non-homeless person would offend some and strike them as insensitive when compared to the magnitude of their sufferings and the goods they could not access.

The further I went into my fieldwork, the more I recognized street persons as I drove downtown or walked to DPC. Things felt different for me when I realized one Wednesday that I was recognizing more street persons than non-homeless persons. I began to feel a kind of new normal and wondered how what I had always known as normal—having the security of a home and work, good health, a lack of an arrest record, a safety net of friends and family—could ever even be so in the face of so many challenges and points of vulnerability.

Besides the boundaries and nature of my role, I was also concerned about the accuracy of interview responses. Here, I faced the problem of not fully belonging to their
group yet wanting their full trust and cooperation in my study. Sociologist Courtney
Bender discovered from her own study of the spirituality of non-profit kitchen volunteers
that “it is impossible to know how artificial or how central any person’s comments or
responses are.”86  Bender’s observation resonated with a few times in my fieldwork
where a person’s interview response was incongruous with what she later shared outside
of it. When the opportunity arose, I tried to reveal more of myself by entering into the
interview conversation and this along with my regular Wednesday attendances may have
helped some to feel comfortable telling their truth and maybe even moved them to share
more at a deeper level, but I wondered if they were keeping from me their “hidden
transcript” of their thoughts and feelings.87  For instance, pregnant pauses at my question
of “Are you in touch with your family?” were sometimes followed by a curt “only a
little” and left at that. I had concerns before beginning the interviews about persons
being honest if they had ambivalent feelings about one of the social worlds or about their
religious views. I received some advice from a cynical volunteer with the homeless at
Penuel Retreat Center who warned me not to believe anything I heard from the homeless
about religion: “It’s all bullshit. They’re used to manipulating in order to survive. And
all they know are Christians who want to ‘save’ them and bring them to Jesus. They will
only tell you what they think will make you happy and let them alone.”  Granted, some

86  Courtney Bender, *Heaven’s Kitchen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003),
139.
might have told me what they thought I wanted to hear, but I trust that more told me what they really thought.

A few vendors and worship service participants expressed worry about critiquing that particular social world. Some vendors worried the staff might find out and they could lose their jobs. Those at the worship service said they did not want to be rude to those feeding them especially if they ever needed to ask the pastor for help. In other words, they saw themselves in a reciprocal relationship with the church—they come to be fed the Word and literally be fed—so they felt it would be wrong to name problems or desired changes. Concern about critiquing the Living Room was not an issue mentioned by subjects, perhaps because they truly had none but also they were not depending on the Living Room for their livelihood as they were with the street paper or possible help from the pastor and church.

Getting people to respond truthfully, and even before that, to let me interview them, may have been a challenge because of my outsider status as a white non-homeless woman, a status that was most noticeable at the worship service (and I will discuss this in Chapter Four). I was concerned that color influenced black homeless persons’ readiness to trust me. I quickly became conscious of my own discomfort in being different and the limitations of my own eyes and ears due to what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva calls a “white habitus.” Bonilla-Silva describes how white habitus comes to be through white social and spatial segregation, “an uninterrupted socialization process that conditions and creates whites’ racial tastes, perceptions, feelings, and emotions and their views on racial
matters."\(^{88}\) In other words, whites do not interpret their segregation from blacks as problematic because they do not interpret it as a racial phenomenon; rather they normalize it by not seeing anything to explain or by explaining it as non-racial. Thus, I may have missed things because my own racialized socialization has habituated me to not see communicative acts among blacks. I may have and probably did miss those “sites of silence” or the 1,000-pound gorilla that situational analysis works to catch. (Indeed, I may have been the 1,000-pound gorilla.) In a word, not only am I concerned about hidden transcripts, but also about what I might be missing as I observed meetings and worship services. To this end, I wonder for future projects about doing more work in this area with a co-ethnographer of color.

Finally, a reader might think that mental illness gets short shrift in this project, so I say upfront that this is not an oversight on my part. I am not trained as a mental health professional so it was not always clear to me who was and was not mentally ill. Frankly, the more time I spent among the homeless, the more I came to see how some “crazy” utterances or views were not really such crazy responses when considering the inhumane traumas some had gone through. One person I interviewed, Gary, said homeless life is a pressure cooker and he constantly feels like he is on the verge of exploding from the different stressors in his life. Some people acted crazy, some were considered crazy, some admitted they had mental illness but I would never have known had they not shared. “Crazy” seemed more periodical to me—a person could seem sane one

Wednesday and then not sane the next. I will speak more to the complexities of mental illness that surfaced among interview subjects as I turn now to my sample, its demographic contours, and interviews.

Sample and Interviews

After explaining my research project and interview process, I secured permission from the pastor leading the worship service, the support group leaders, and The Contributor staff in order to solicit interviews with homeless persons associated with each social world at DPC. I asked leaders to introduce me and my project to the homeless participants in their ministries. Because I was present and observing these ministries for a little over a year, the ministry leaders and many of the homeless persons became familiar with me. Some homeless persons heard of what I was doing “by word of mouth” and they approached me to interview them. I also personally solicited interviews using the language in the written and oral consent process. I provided a verbal consent form and upon completion of the interview, I compensated them with their choice of a bus pass or $5. I compensated them with $10 when they took pictures because there was more sustained effort involved on their parts.

I chose interview questions that I hoped would help me gather information not only about the person’s current life of faith (prayer, material religion, singing, bible reading, etc…) but also their self-understandings, life histories, and their involvement in and understanding of the DPC social world(s) particularly in relation to expressing their faith and being given a place to experience safety and dignity. Interviews included demographic questions but were primarily open-ended (“Tell me about how you became
homeless” or “Tell me why you took this picture.” for instance.). I included some questions about how they make meaning of hard times as I wanted to see how they understood who God was and used their faith to interpret points of struggle. I also had some follow up questions prepared for getting a more in depth answer. Some of my interviews were with persons who photographed pictures of sacred spaces. I gave out disposable cameras and asked persons to photograph where they felt close to God.89 See Appendix A-F for all interview questions and the consent forms that I submitted to the IRB.

Interviews lasted between 25-120 minutes and typically were 50-60 minutes. I conducted them in public spaces and gave the subjects a choice on where to meet. They often chose to meet immediately after a meeting at DPC in one of the church’s rooms or to walk a block or so to the Downtown Public Library and meet in a study room. I found this to be optimal for gathering data; otherwise, we exchanged numbers and scheduled a meeting time and often subjects were no-shows for interviews. Over a dozen persons were no-shows. While research with non-homeless persons may have that high number of no-shows, I wondered if it underscored the vulnerability, unpredictability, and stress of homeless life. Contributor vendors often wanted to meet outside on a work break at a public bench or park. Some asked to meet at a coffee shop, like the one situated at the library. Those opting for this venue typically remarked that meeting there gave them

89 I am indebted to Susan Dunlap for this idea. Since talking with her, I found a study in Britain on homelessness used this method to ask 12 participants to photograph their everyday experiences of street life. See Alan Radley et al, “Visualizing Homelessness: A Study in Photography and Estrangement,” *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, 15: 273-95, 2005.
something “normal” to look forward to and they liked feeling like they “were a part of the world” by sitting down over a cup of coffee in the midst of working non-homeless people.

Before interviews, I guaranteed their confidentiality and explained that they could stop at any point, refuse any question, or ask me a question. To minimize the risk of triggering a flashback to a traumatizing experience or anxiety during the interview, I did not ask questions specifically about traumatizing experiences such as forms of violence. This offered respondents the freedom to disclose as much or as little as they wanted. To minimize the risk of respondents feeling shame for participating in life activities considered “sinful” or for not meeting perceived expectations of faithful religious practices, I reassured them that I was not there to judge and that any response on faith they gave was acceptable. I was careful to let each participant know that their responses have been only helpful and considered a success by me and that I am grateful for the gift of their stories.

I conducted a total of 56 interviews. Fourteen interviews were with non-homeless founders, leaders and volunteers at each DPC homeless social world as well as one member of DPC who is a local historian and the founder of A Room in the Inn, one of the main homeless service providers in Nashville. I held 42 interviews with homeless and formerly homeless persons, including two Living Room leaders (one is formerly homeless, the other has recently become homeless again). The “formerly” descriptor was fluid: in the time of my fieldwork, some lost that status, others gained it, a few lost and then regained it. Out of these 42 persons, there was overlap in their involvement in the
three studied social worlds: at some point, 20 had participated in the Living Room, 19 had attended the homeless worship service, and 17 had worked for or were currently working for The Contributor. Thus, sometimes I could interview one person and she would talk about her experience of more than one social world.

The following provides some demographic statistics. My sample was largely male (26 men to 16 women), white (24 whites to 18 African Americans) and over the age of forty (about 70%). The largest age group of all subjects was 50 and older. The oldest subject was 65 and the youngest was 19-years-old. Six persons interviewed as couples and asked for joint interviews for their own scheduling and safety concerns. Over 70% of persons interviewed had either completed some high school, graduated from high school, or obtained a GED. When I asked one about her education, she simply replied, “I can’t read.” None of the subjects graduated from college. Two men were war veterans. About 75% of the subjects reported having been married or having lived with someone at some point, and 60% said that they had children. Over half of the subjects reported either not being in touch with their family or communication being difficult because of family conflict or their not meeting family expectations. Substance abuse was reported by a third of the subjects.

Responses to the question about having had or currently having mental illness were difficult for me to gauge. Two subjects told me they were unsure and wanted my opinion as to “if I thought they were crazy.” A third of the subjects (33%) reported an unambiguous yes although one could not recall if her mental health provider told her she had manic depression or simply depression. One said he wanted help for the mental
illness of witnessing violence in the projects as a child that is “still in his head.” Almost half (48%) gave an unambiguous no, but about 20% of those qualified their negative responses. Five persons qualified a negative response with information about feeling depressed, anxious, or stressed and either wanting or receiving help for it. Unlike these persons who differentiated depression and anxiety from mental illness, five other persons who said yes, named depression or anxiety as their mental illness. Among those who responded no, five later did share their struggle with some form of mental illness, thus revealing that some may have wanted to hide their mental health status from me or perhaps distance themselves from it as they told their stories. These responses were revealing in how the homeless define mental illness differently and how they may not be getting access to health providers or are comprehending information from health providers. Responses also showed how a few saw me as an authority on this matter and how some may want to keep their mental health status private for fear they will be judged.

Regarding religious affiliation, when I asked about the church they attended with their family while growing up, the largest response was Baptist (37%). The second largest group reported never having one church community but moving around among a few to several churches of different denominations (24%). There was a great gap between that and the third largest response, tied between Catholicism and Pentecostalism, together making up less than 15% of the entire group. Over 70% reported that a church and/or pastor had not been helpful to them and their family when they were young.
When I asked about their current faith community, over half (53%) reported that they did not have one. Of those 21 subjects, three individuals self-identify outside of Christianity (as Jewish, atheistic, and agnostic). For persons who say that they have a faith community, the largest group (21%) attends nondenominational churches. Eight of the 19 persons (42%) report enjoying their church because of the fellowship and worship experience and finding their church and pastor helpful. It is worth noting that within this number of 46% claiming a faith community, a significant number reported irregular attendance due to work or lack of transportation (40%). Their attendance only began because they were given rides from their shelters and assurances of help with food and clothes (68%). A smaller number within those attending a church voiced a desire for isolation from others in the congregation while in worship (13%). Although a significant number of those attending church found their church and pastor helpful, these additional findings within this group show that those who claim a faith community may be as isolated in living out their faith as many of the 53% who consider themselves Christians but have no faith community. Community and isolation are issues I will return to throughout my project.

Overview

Because the homeless’ belief-practices are shaped by their material conditions, Chapter One explores the history of the place of Nashville in terms of its progress and poverty. It is within this place that Downtown Presbyterian Church and its homeless social worlds will emerge as will the transient poor and their primary service providers. This chapter shows how in the making and remaking of downtown Nashville, the
extremely poor—and eventually the religiously based homeless providers who shelter them—are perceived as transgressors or, “matter out of place,” as Mary Douglas said in her now classic *Purity and Danger* (1966). Chapter One will examine some of Nashville’s varied and repeated responses to the extreme poor and reasons for why the homeless and their services have been vulnerable to displacement. There is a clear story to be told here and because Damian Williams has done such impressive work on this story already, I will rely on this. Using the work of Williams, I will trace the origins of the forced relocations of two of the main homeless men’s shelters now on 8th Avenue North (or what has been dubbed “the homeless highway”) the Men’s Mission and A Room in the Inn (at the Campus for Human Development). Because many homeless women and men I interviewed also found shelter or help through Tent City, the Salvation Army, and the Women’s Mission, I will expand on Williams’ work with attention to the stories of their own forced relocations. It is from these places or new post flood encampments that many men and women regularly trek toward Downtown Presbyterian Church to participate in its homeless social worlds on Wednesdays. Often the homeless do not simply disappear but are pressured to relocate by numerous forces such as Nashville’s downtown revitalization projects and the natural disaster of the 2010 Flood. The process of forced relocation occurs in a mode of what sociologist Harvey Molotch calls “lash-up.”90 Because Williams’ work attends only to the sociological aspects of this

90 I am indebted to Dr. Laura Carpenter and the work of her student, Damian Williams, for introducing me to Molotch’s idea that is helpful for my own project. Harvey Molotch, “History Repeats Itself, But How?: City, Character, Urban Tradition, and the Accomplishment of Place,” *American Social Review* 65 (Dec 2000): 793.
story that for him is solely about the city’s making of an “organized ghetto” in the Lafayette District, I will expand on this story and do a theological reading of it.

Chapter Two covers how both the church and these three homeless social worlds located there came into being. DPC’s identity as an urban church was born of a schism in 1955 largely due to suburbanization. Homeless social worlds formed after DPC emerged as and embraced its identity as an urban church. The formative stories of the Wednesday worship and lunch, the Living Room, and The Contributor will show that most of their founders had no intention of starting a ministry at DPC but their recognition of the humanity of the homeless in redemptive interpersonal encounters took them to this church because of its downtown place in Nashville. The founders’ commitments and each group’s self-identities are grounded in the pastors’ and laities’ own understanding of Christian stories and the divine in light of their personal experiences of being with homeless persons—or, for some leaders who are formerly homeless, in light of their experiences of street life and where they found places to appear as more than stigmatized. Since identities of the church and its homeless social worlds are constantly in the process of being renegotiated, each will show the ambiguity of being a faith-ful place that can stretch to give and fall short of giving the homeless a place to appear as fully human.91

Chapters 3-5 explore how each homeless social world at DPC is a site of lived religion for those homeless participating in them. Chapter 3 looks at the Living Room, a support group that meets weekly in the basement parlor of DPC “to listen to one another, to share insights from personal experience, to encourage one another and to address

91 Fulkerson, Places of Redemption, 56, 60.
specific needs of self and city.” The Living Room is led by one of its founders, a Presbyterian minister and activist, along with a retired social worker, a divinity school graduate, and two formerly homeless members of the Living Room. Chapter 3 examines how many homeless turn to the Living Room for what they do not find in a church: a caring community and what some of them call a spiritual place where they can feel close to God and experience dignity. As such, Chapter 3 explores Living Room practices making this a caring or spiritual place: storytelling and empathetic listening; sleeping; lamenting; and hoping, particularly through celebrating milestones and proverbial speech that encourages patience in divine providence. I also point out moments where homeless participants, the group leaders, and I see tensions as to how the Living Room continues to be a faithful place for the homeless to regard themselves and be regarded as more than “matter out of place.” Because the Living Room is a small support group, in my analysis I will draw on Robert Wuthnow’s *Sharing the Journey* (1994), a study of North American small and support group spirituality that helps to show where a context of homelessness needs to be considered in such an account of spirituality.92

Chapter 4 will focus on the social world of the homeless worship service at DPC and where this communal worship gives the homeless a place to practice their faith and to appear as fully human, and where it falls short. Here I will examine how their own bodily proprieties shaped by homeless life enter into this worship space and how stigma

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92 Wuthnow argues that small and support groups are a vital part of North American spirituality and that they are changing how individuals understand community and the sacred. His study does not include work with homeless support groups. In Chapter 3, I will invoke Wuthnow’s findings to show the difference a homeless context makes for studying spirituality found in support groups.
and shame affect the service. Held in the basement chapel, the service consists of a welcome, prayer, and sermon. The reasons given by the homeless attending the service are varied, ranging from a non-religious obligatory routine to reciprocating with the church feeding them to finding a quiet place indoors. Whether they mean to be religious in this space or not, most choose to come in part to counter the worship experience forced upon them at the Mission. While some hear (and the pastor means to deliver) an uplifting message, sometimes the spoken message and the space in which it is received—locked doors, a waiting line, and a door guard—seem Foucault-like in the discipline of a crowd seen as needing some middle class manners and self-control. The discipline seems to underwrite stigma and shame. At times, the way conflict is handled over noise in the service can be shaming. I assess all of this as much as I can from the views of the homeless themselves, the pastor, and my own interpretation of the service, all of which differ.

Chapter 5 examines Contributor vendors and how many view their work place as a site of lived faith despite the fact that the growing attention to vocation and the movement of faith-at-work do not focus on this kind of low-paying, low-skill job. This chapter also investigates how The Contributor makes a difference for vendors to feel more fully human in their selling spot, often through opportunities to reverse their invisibilities as they experience themselves as productive citizens and are seen by law enforcement, merchants, and customers as trusted and worthy of respect. One bodily habituation developed with this job, waving and smiling, may provide vendors with the chance to experience dignity different from a habitus of ritual deference or avoidance.
many have learned on the streets. Waving and smiling take on religious significance for some vendors who want to express gratitude to God with their “positive attitude” and think they have been called to this work to testify on behalf of the homeless.

Of course, not every vendor feels empowered by the Gospel in their work; some feel they embody a message of shame when onlookers see them as “homeless beggars” or refuse to see them or due to the physical challenges and monotony of this job. However, several vendors see themselves as healers, prophets or preachers giving God’s message to their customers to convert from fearing and stereotyping the homeless as panhandlers. I see the vendors as kinds of street preachers giving a word not only in the written text they sell but more importantly in their embodied presence that makes Nashville’s public space a contested one as they authorize the street corners for the Gospel and resist non-homeless persons wanting to criminalize their work, like the Brentwood suburb. They testify to the brokenness of social injustices and the possibility for redemption when non-homeless onlookers make room for them to appear.

As a segue into the next chapter dealing with sacred space, this chapter concludes with an analysis of the ways vendors understand and make their selling site a sacred space. Sometimes this works to support street preaching as vendors will don clothes with religious messages. Beyond delivering a message, vendors experience their work as what they call a ‘worship spot’ in five activities: practicing dependency on God’s provision in a test of faith; wearing significant religious jewelry; being in nature; singing; and, hearing sounds that evoke memories of loved ones. Making sacred space out of their business
corners lets some vendors positively manage stigmas attached to their extreme poverty because the worship spot emplaces them with others, creation, and God.

While the other chapters have focused on how the homeless live out their faith within the social worlds of DPC, Chapter 6 focuses on the homeless person’s experience of sacred space and objects, including their own bodies, that they identify in their own photographs. I include this discussion because it sheds light on the “tactics” of the homeless as “walking exile” (so, de Certeau) and how, when they are not participating in the social worlds of DPC, they cobble together ways to be close to God in the midst of surviving dislocation. If homelessness threatens a sense of self and belonging (Snow and Anderson 1993), their sacred spaces may allow them to experience a sense of emplacement and dignity and know that they are more than matter out of place, in fact, that they indeed matter to God. Here, I focus on 6 broad themes generated from their photographs and namings of sacred space: divine absence and protection; country music; creativity; the natural world; companionship with animals; and, caring interactions and care for one’s body. These encompass activities, feelings, or memories, as well as scripture and prayers associated with spaces in the photos. Many of the homeless also named tattoos as a sacred thing that helped them feel close to God, so I have included them as well. As embodied spiritual practices of the homeless, tattoos evoke cherished bible verses and stories and memories of lost loved ones and offer a way for some homeless to creatively act and claim their own bodies as mattering even in a world that undermines their sense of Belovedness.
My concluding chapter primarily does three things. First, I compare my findings on how each social world at DPC is a site of lived faith for the homeless coming to DPC and evaluate their care given to the homeless to provide them with a shame or stigma-free place. I am asking here, who among the social worlds is the real Evangelist based on my own theological normative claims. Second, with my findings in mind, I work toward an adequate definition of spirituality for this project’s task. A complicating factor in doing a project on Christian spirituality is that the term ‘spirituality’ has taken on numerous definitions and has suffered from conceptual confusion. For the purpose of contrast, I first touch on understandings of spirituality that are inadequate for this project from a concept that comes out of the “spiritual but not religious” to an understanding of it limited to contemplative prayer. For an adequate definition of spirituality I use concepts by Rowan Williams and Sandra Schneiders who call for widening the horizons of spirituality to include the whole of a person’s experience.93 Both pave the way to an adequate account of spirituality by overturning the historical development of spirituality’s focus on an elite way of life and returning spirituality’s involvement to a person’s whole life, including everyday material and social realities. I expand on and clarify the account of spirituality given by Schneiders with four features necessary to spirituality in the context of homelessness: practices, a faith community, terror, and agency. Faith community, while taken as a given by Schneiders for traditioning,94 is not so essential to

93 Sandra Schneiders, “Theology and Spirituality: Strangers, Rivals, or Partners?” Horizons 13 no. 2 (Fall 1986): 253-274.
the homeless person’s spiritual life as a place to make them accountable to others or to “school” them in inscriptive traditions as it is a place for them to appear with dignity and to understand themselves as fully human and beloved. This point is significant for my project because I am surmising that the homeless practice an isolated spirituality and not always of their choosing, unlike many North Americans who choose to be spiritual in an individualistic way detached from faith community. In short, experience focused on practices, a community facilitating belonging and dignity, the acknowledgement of terror and the healing of it through compassion, and agency are key considerations for a definition of spirituality among homeless persons who self-identify as Christians.

Finally, my conclusion makes a case for spirituality as a viable analytical concept in theological scholarship. Spirituality particularly in the field of sociology has been challenged as to its viability. I will lay out criticisms against it by Matthew Wood, but I hope to show that in sociology and in practical theology, spirituality can be a useful concept for inquiries into lived faith.

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95 Isolation as a feature of the lived faith of the poor has been found in other research. See Tex Sample, Hard Living People and Mainstream Christians (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 75-88 and Susan Crawford Sullivan, Living Faith, 208-212.
Chapter 1

Telling the Tale: Placing Nashville, Placing the Out-of-Place

While the most intimate, direct, and personal religious experiences can be examined productively as merely an individual event, no person fails to be influenced by the powerful social forces within which she finds herself. –Judith Weisenfeld

It’s progress you know. We have to take it as it comes. I worry about some of [the tenants], about what they are going to do. –Zoa Dearman, 87-year-old front desk clerk at Sam Davis Hotel

Transgression simply means ‘crossing a line.’ Transgression is an inherently spatial idea. The line that is crossed is often a geographical line and a socio-cultural one. It may or may not be that transgression by someone who is disturbed by it...The construction of place forms the basis for the possibility of transgression or in Mary Douglas’ terms, pollution. Just as we have a term for thinking about things in the wrong time—anachronism—we might invent a term for things in the wrong place—anchorism. –Tim Creswell

Whose Place? Whose Progress?

Standing on the corner of 5th Avenue and Church Street in front of Downtown Presbyterian, I get a fairly good view of the city’s scene. Looking above the church bell towers, that once dominated Nashville’s skyline, I see the AT and T skyscraper now dwarfs it, as do the surrounding banking and publishing centers and the Nashville Convention Center, only one block away. Looking one block south beyond pay-for-parking lots, I see the Ryman Auditorium with its Gothic stain glass windows. Originally the Gospel Tabernacle that hosted revivalists like Billy Sunday and Aimee McPherson, it later became the Mother Church of the Grand Ole Opry. Behind the Ryman, I glimpse the modern spire and curve of the Country Music Hall of Fame. If I climbed up into one

3 Tim Cresswell, Place (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 103.
of Downtown Presbyterian’s bell towers and peered west, I could probably catch sight of
the Centennial Park Parthenon and the tops of a few university campuses. I could see
around me the presence of other old downtown churches that have survived changes to
the central city area and the waves of suburbanization. Across the Cumberland River, I
could make out the housing projects where some homeless persons I have interviewed are
running from or are waiting to get in via a long placement list. Homeless tent
communities along the river would remain unseen, as they would intend, but I could spot
the main service providers for the homeless along 8th Avenue—to the north, the
Women’s Rescue Mission, and to the south, the new high rise Campus for Human
Development for A Room in the Inn and the old Sears building turned Nashville Men’s
Rescue Mission. I could also see the looping knot of Interstates 65, 40, and 24, a sign
that Nashville had “arrived” as a city and cemented its role as a key intersection for
national traffic but also a place where many homeless arrive into the city from the bus
station and empty out into the “homeless highway” of shelters and services or carve out
shelter under the highways on which they came.4

The view from this church tower also provides a view into the tale of the making
of this city. A Sunbelt New South city of finance, Music City, U.S.A., the Protestant
Vatican and Buckle of the Bible Belt, the Athens of the South—these are but a few of the

4 Many homeless refer to 8th Avenue North as this, but I have heard some homeless
women include their stretch of 8th Avenue South in this. Williams says the name began
with a local merchant talking about the Lafayette District. Williams, “Down and Out,” 4.
places that the city of Nashville has made itself to be⁵ and identities whose primary features can obscure its also having become a place for the extremely poor and transient.⁶ Whether Nashville identifies itself as a place of financial power and entrepreneurship, music, religion, or knowledge, central to these self-understandings is the notion of progress, an impulse to forge ahead and grow. But, “progress” according to whom—those in-place or those out-of-place whom as Zoa Dearman said in the chapter epigraph, “have to take it as it comes”? This chapter provides the history of the place of Nashville in terms of its progress and poverty, particularly attending to the downtown area inhabited by Downtown Presbyterian Church and the many homeless persons participating in the church’s social worlds. It is within this urban context that the place of Downtown Presbyterian will emerge, as will the transient poor and their primary service providers. It is also within this context that the spiritual lives of the homeless persons I interviewed and observed create what religious scholar Marla Frederick calls “a complex fusion with their material reality.”⁷ That is, their belief-practices will be shaped by their material conditions in

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ways that both constrain and empower them to survive and at times triumph over their adversities. As religious historian Weisenfeld suggests in the epigraph, the spiritual experiences of these homeless persons are not happening in a vacuum but are embedded in a material place, so giving an account of the place of Nashville matters for understanding their lives of faith.

This chapter tells the tale of how the making and remaking of the place of downtown Nashville, the extremely poor—and eventually even the homeless providers who shelter them—are seen repeatedly as transgressors of city space. Transgressors are, as social and human geographer Tim Cresswell says in the epigraph, “anachorisms” or “things in the wrong place.” To transgress is to unintentionally disturb spatial boundaries and offend taken-for-granted norms that result in those “in place” noticing someone as deviant or “matter out of place.” “Matter out of place” is a phrase Cresswell uses from Mary Douglas’ classic *Purity and Danger* (1966) in his spatial analysis of reactions to transgressors and power relations in urban settings. Drawing on Douglas’ examination of dirt and pollution, he calls transgressors “matter out of place”—they have become the dirt that, as Douglas says, can’t be ignored when under the bed or on the kitchen floor because it is “in the wrong place” and “disgusts us” when “it appears where it shouldn’t be…dirt is valued by few people. It annoys us with its persistence, its audacity to keep turning up in places we thought were clean, pure and pristine.”

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enforced action, and neighborhood opposition. This chapter also will examine the main reasons for why the homeless—and those services providing shelter for them—repeatedly have been vulnerable to displacement in Nashville: urban development, historic preservationist ideals, deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill, and a fear and disgust of those whom Nashville neighborhoods and businesses want out of their way in making community and maintaining high property values. The trajectory of place making in downtown Nashville shows a history of displacement of the blighted. There is a clear story to be told here, particularly in relation to the homeless and the city’s late 20th century’s cycle of disinvestment-revitalization-displacement of the homeless. Often the homeless do not simply disappear but relocate out of necessity in a mode of what sociologist Harvey Molotch calls “lash-up.”9 Where they are allowed to re-emerge and the struggle to do depends in large part on their being perceived as matter out of place by those in place (see Appendix G for map of relocations).

Because this story already has been so ably told by sociologist Damian Williams, in my own re-telling, I draw upon his work and expand on it for the theological purposes of my project, according to my own theological normative claims (that God’s presence or wisdom or grace can be found in the creation of a space for the homeless to feel honored

9 Harvey Molotch, “History Repeats Itself, But How?: City, Character, Urban Tradition, and the Accomplishment of Place,” American Social Review 65 (Dec 2000): 793. Also, see Williams, “Down and Out,” 28. For the entire story, see pp.47-107. I am indebted to Laura Carpenter for introducing me to Molotch’s theory and the work of her former student, Damian Williams. Since his focus is on the Lafayette District, Williams uses this theory to show how the Mission and A Room in the Inn (now in the Lafayette District) become a part of what he calls an “organizational ghetto” for homeless men (106-107). I want to use this theory to see how the lash-up is causing other homeless shelters to disassemble and reassemble because of the stigmas attached to homelessness.
as created in the image of God or their nurtured agency) and raising theological issues and implications. In my introduction, I referred to Schilderman’s defined tasks of practical theology that can be helpful for sociological ethnographies of the homeless (Schilderman 2011). According to Schilderman, three of the tasks of practical theology include seeking out where the Christian tradition matters for social problems and issues such as homelessness, finding our identities, and judging dominant core values. I hope to do the work of these tasks by seeing what theological categories of grace, sin, and the human condition say about this tale of Nashville and the problem of homelessness; the ways the homeless negotiate stigmatized identities; and the core values and attitudes of Nashville’s churches and non-homeless persons toward the homeless.

*Nashville 1789-1915*

Place making for Nashville first begins with white land seekers, drawn to the American wilderness, hoping to lay claim to the western frontier that Native Americans called home. In December 1789, James Robertson led a party of eight white frontiersmen and one black slave to the Bluffs, about eighty feet above the Cumberland River near the French Lick sulfur springs annexed by French traders. Robertson and his men cleared fields for a corn crop and began building Fort Nashborough. Robertson was working by the claim of one Richard Henderson to western lands acquired by a private treaty, the Cumberland Compact, with the Cherokee inhabitants. Repeated Indian raids over the next thirty years indicate that claim to land was insecure and perhaps dubious in the eyes of those Native Americans who first inhabited the space and refused to be so easily removed. After putting down the Indian raids, Fort Nashborough became the merchant
and river town of Nashville; with the advent of steamboat transportation, its population grew to more than 5,000 people, coming for new opportunities in trading cotton, tobacco, and corn. From its beginnings, the making of Nashville by white settlers meant a racialized displacing of others whose presence got in the way of their own notion of progress. This displacement of the Native Americans will be celebrated over a century later in Nashville’s Centennial Exposition (1897), which was designed to demonstrate the city’s post-Civil War enlightenment, by using Indians in posters and parades to symbolize the antithesis of the civilizing progress Nashville had achieved.

During the Civil War and post-Civil War era of 1860-1880, the city’s commerce continued coming from the riverfront on 1st Avenue and Broad (later Broadway) as well as the addition of two new railroad stations, Union on 8th Avenue and Broad and Cummins in the low drainage area, the Gulch, south of Broad. Steamboats, railway, lumber mills, a brewery, and slaughterhouses lent to Nashville’s economic development and as it grew, the city’s center during this time continued to have a mixing of social classes and races. Before 1890 the city’s pattern of segregation by class and ethnicity was ambiguous; the city’s center was densely packed with a population that remained mixed in part because the central business district (CBD) contained both residences and workplaces.

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The wards of the old city center began to acquire distinct characters and a category labeled “the poor” as distinct from “respectable citizenry” became increasingly evident in the Nashvillians’ thinking as the city grew (see Appendix G). The commercial heart of the city, wards one and two, held warehouses, taverns, stores (with the homes of merchants above them), banks, and brothels, catering mostly to Civil War soldiers and then veterans as well as river boaters. Wards three and fourth were mostly comprised of skilled workingmen householders. The wealthy fifth ward— which Downtown Presbyterian, then “Old First,” inhabited— became a fashionable residential section that gradually added a high-end pedestrian shopping arcade. The sixth ward, near the commercial city center south of Broad Street, was the poorest section, a low drainage area including the Gulch that absorbed day laborers and foreign immigrants. In the early twentieth century, this sixth ward will become known as “Black Bottom,” named for its predominantly black population.

The mixing of social classes in the CBD really began changing with the first suburban wave in the 1890’s and early 1900’s. The suburban trend came about with a growing awareness of the city’s threat to moral vice and public health. Along Lower Broad, a block or two from Old First Church was the “Men’s Quarter” or a red-light district with brothels, saloons, and gambling dens. Respectable women wanting to dine at the Maxwell House Hotel that faced 4th Street had to use the lady’s entrance on Church Street in order to avoid this “masculine” turf of moral depravity.12 Such spaces became

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an impetus for respectable families to leave. In addition to the concern for moral vice was public health. As the CBD became surrounded by an industrial ring along the Cumberland River and railroad tracks, at its edges emerged slums plagued by poverty, disease, and vice. The worst slums were Black Bottom and Hells Half Acre (along Capitol Hill beyond the fourth ward, see Appendix G). These slums, a century later, will be the sites where three of the four major homeless providers are forced to relocate, but I am getting ahead of myself. Cholera and yellow fever epidemics periodically ravaged Nashville where a clean water supply was a constant concern. Nashville’s limestone base made modern sewer and water systems difficult to construct. They were also expensive, so many poor families stayed with shallow wells easily contaminated by outdoor privies. Nashville health officers fell back on racial explanations for high death rates among blacks in the 1890’s and argued that Black Bottom dwellers were simply racially susceptible to disease and didn’t know how to stay personally clean. Such explanations not only placed the responsibility on victims of diseases but also linked a dread of disease with race and class.

Nashville’s first suburbs offered upper class families a semi-rural refuge from not just the increasingly visible moral pollution of Lower Broad’s brothels, gambling dens, and saloons but also the physical pollution of germs from living in a crowded city. At first, the flight was seasonal: many city streets were covered in animal manure, urine, and garbage with a stench that grew intolerable in summer months and sent wealthy families

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13 For this information, Doyle draws on *Reports of the Departments of the City of Nashville* from 1891 and 1911. Doyle, *Nashville*, 83-84.
packing for the watering spas of Monteagle and Beersheba Springs in the Cumberland Mountains. But within the first decades of the twentieth century, the advent of the electric trolley that replaced mule drawn street cars made it possible for more upper income families to permanently leave their homes in the old city center. Early fashionable suburbs of Nashville began to appear: a segregated black development north of downtown around Fisk University and Jefferson Street, Edgefield across the river in East Nashville, West End around a cluster of schools including Vanderbilt and the University of Nashville and further west, Belle Meade with Percy and Edwin Warner deer and horse parks and a country club. Nashville’s upper classes had responded to the moral and health pollution of the central city by removing themselves from one place and making another where there was no matter out of place. By 1915, Nashville had transformed into a modern city with defined residential and commercial zones and neighborhoods segregated more by ethnicity and social class.¹⁴ (This first suburban wave and the subsequent ones in the mid 20th century will be an important feature of the formation of Downtown Presbyterian Church and I will discuss its significance more in chapter 2.)

As Nashville’s vice-ridden areas and disease-ridden slums became difficult to ignore, the city responded in varied place-making practices meant to contain and displace transgressors. These will be repeated decades later as we shall see with the “revitalization” of Lower Broad. One practice was displacement of the poor through city development. This may be best illustrated by a struggle to reclaim Black Bottom slums.

¹⁴ Doyle, Nashville, 87-99.
Some residents wanted to turn a portion of the slums into a city Haymarket that would increase country trade. The Centennial Women’s Club lobbied to create a park, promoting respectable family leisure, but their plan was defeated due to fear that a park might allow for slum dwellers to come into more contact with middle-class neighborhoods and families. In the end, parts of Black Bottom slums were eradicated to build a bridge for increasing commerce. It is unclear what became of the tenants displaced from their makeshift dwellings.

Besides urban development, religious reform was an important way some late nineteenth-century Nashvillians sought to resolve their city’s social problems of vice and poverty. Sam Jones was an itinerant born-again Methodist evangelist in the traditions of the Holiness Movement and Social Gospel who, more than anyone else, may have been responsible for religious reform’s popularity in the South and locally in this city. His Gospel Tent meetings on 8th and Broad brought in thousands who heard him talk of communal sin and salvation and ridicule the selfishness of churches not aiding the poor. Among his more famous converts was Tom Ryman, a riverboat and saloon owner. Ryman converted his saloon into a religion meeting hall, mounted Scripture boards on downtown street corners, and sent gospel wagons filled with food, medicine, and clothes to the poor in the city. He eventually built Jones his own edifice on 5th and Commerce so that he would not have to preach in tents—the Union Gospel Tabernacle, which later became the Ryman.

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15 Doyle, *Nashville*, 80-82.
Religious enthusiasm spread among other individual philanthropic efforts with the poor including Fannie Battle, a member of McKendree Methodist Downtown who began United Charities and Martha O’Bryan, a member of Old First who created a clinic for the poor in North Nashville and Hell’s Half Acre.\(^{17}\) The Salvation Army, which eventually become an important homeless provider in Nashville, began operations in the city in 1890 with a working man’s hotel and rummage store in North Nashville on College Street but quickly found more clientele in the “Men’s Quarters” and moved there on 4\(^{th}\) and Commerce.\(^{18}\) The Salvation Army found Nashville a ripe place for its evangelical work of “fighting for people’s souls” and “binding up the wounded, spiritually and physically.”\(^{19}\) The Salvation Army focused on reforming immoral transient men through work. One important fight for them then was against “sinful pleasures” like liquor, which each Christian soldier had to renounce when he or she signed upon joining the “Articles of War.”\(^{20}\) Temperance also had been important for both Sam Jones and Tom Ryman who condemned drunkenness as a root of many evils. Thus, the impulse for religious reform through conversion not only wound its way into organized Christian philanthropy for alleviating poverty in Nashville but also fueled the temperance movement. Government authorities and churches became involved in the call for a dry city. An expanded police force and legislation intended to enforce moral standards and stamp out public drunkenness, prostitution, and gambling that had existed in pockets

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\(^{19}\) Ibid.  
\(^{20}\) Ibid.
around Lower Broad since at least the Civil War. Women from downtown churches like Old First held all night prayer vigils in support of the prohibition amendment that finally passed in 1909.\textsuperscript{21}

The slums continued to cause problems with a growing rural population. During the 1920’s, Nashville, like other Southern cities, experienced a great migration of people from rural areas. Many of the rural migrants were drawn to Nashville by its burgeoning country music scene. The insurance industry sought out Nashville as a place for its companies and in 1925 one company expanded their markets in a way that changed the city: to promote their product, National Life sponsored new country music radio stations including a Saturday night barn dance broadcast show called the Grand Ole Opry which later settled into the Ryman Auditorium and dominated the downtown night scene, bringing the Lower Broad district’s name “Hillbilly Highway.”\textsuperscript{22} Some rural migrants found work through the city’s underworld in the vice districts along 4\textsuperscript{th} and 6\textsuperscript{th} between Church and Union (the space surrounding Downtown Presbyterian Church). Overlapping these vice districts were the slums of Hell’s Half Acre where other rural migrants found shelter. Poor neighborhoods continued to ring the central city, pocketed near railroads and factories where rural migrants lived in makeshift box cars that flooded readily, so close to the Cumberland. Some, wanting to maintain a diet and farming lifestyle that

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext{21}{Doyle, \textit{Nashville}, 135.}
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they knew, brought pigs and chickens into these slums which created sanitary problems that sociologists of the time blamed on the “maladjusted” country folk.23

One way Nashville worked to eradicate its slums that had blighted the downtown landscape since the late nineteenth century was through public housing development in the 1930s. In response to the Great Depression, FDR’s New Deal legislation with the 1934 and 1937 National Housing Acts linked public housing for low-income renters with slum clearance.24 Nashville used federal funds to construct public housing where Hell’s Half Acre was situated. Racial and social segregation was preserved and fostered in the implementation of public housing as it worked with the vision of most Nashville business leaders of progressivism, a vision of long term social planning and development programs aiming to protect property values and control orderly growth through zoning.25

The New Deal’s most controversial building project in Nashville involved two segregated public housing buildings in Hell’s Half Acre behind the State Capitol. Worried about competition, private land realtors and landlords were unenthusiastic about this public housing experiment. In 1938, they took their concerns to the City Council and urged the city to force slum landlords to clean up existing housing for the poor without federal intervention. They appealed on the basis of religion: “Let’s clean up our slums as Christians would do it. Let’s try to inculcate in these poor people the desire to live in better surroundings...Let’s lift them spiritually to higher levels first, then they’ll take care

23 Doyle, Nashville Since the 1920s (Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 1985), 45.
25 Doyle, Nashville Since the 1920s, 76-77.
of their own housing.”26 Essentially, they argued that all slum dwellers needed was not new housing but Christian formation and the teaching of Christian values like proper house care. Other landlords predicted public housing was bound to fail, based on race and class. As one black landlord ironically said—“You can take us Negroes out of the slums, but you can’t take slum ways of living out of some classes of us Negroes.”27 In other words, some black slum dwellers would blight the new public housing because now inherent to them is a blighted condition—they are habituated to “slum ways” and so will not take care of and do not deserve new livable public housing.

The City Council moved forward with the public housing in Hell’s Half Acre but it conceded to the opposition by using public housing in Nashville as a tool for controlling property values. A ring of public housing projects did clear out some slums in that area, but it left several to exist and then created a circle around them to serve as a “‘a barrier to protect the better residential sections’” in any nearby suburbs.28 As such, public housing allowed the slums to perpetuate. When public housing did clear them out, it typically displaced previous poor residents who could not afford the higher rent of the new housing and had to relocate. About a decade after the New Deal’s public housing work, the remaining slums of Hell’s Half Acre were finally removed not through public housing construction but a new urban development project. In 1949 the Nashville city

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26 Quotation from The Tennessean, Nov 1, 1938 in Doyle, Nashville Since the 1920s, 97.
27 Quotation from The Tennessean, Nov 15, 1938 in Doyle, Nashville Since the 1920s, 97.
28 Doyle, Nashville Since the 1920s, 98.
chamber used funds from the Truman’s Federal Housing Act\textsuperscript{29} to turn that land into commercial use to create the James Robertson Parkway as well as a green area, offices, and parking lots that could require and pay a higher property tax. This large-scale project, known as the Capitol Hill Redevelopment Project, was considered a milestone for Nashville’s postwar progress and provided a catalyst for a series of more development projects meant to beautify and strengthen the city’s economy, all the while displacing the poor who were given no viable housing options.\textsuperscript{30}

Before moving on, let me briefly summarize my point with this early history of the city. Progress has played a significant role in the making of the place of Nashville and has involved those in place expunging, fleeing, and reforming those deemed out of place. The first settlers displaced Native Americans to create a white civilized place of commerce. The commerce built by steamboat river trade and railroads created wealth for the upper classes who inhabited a fashionable district while bringing in more workers to the city where they found crowded living space along the industrialized areas in slums. Upper class city residents experienced the proximity to the poor in the city’s center as too close and a risk to their physical and moral health, so they sought distance from them through suburban retreat. As social problems from poverty and moral vices became more visible along Lower Broad as well as in the growth of slums, the city elite’s response

\textsuperscript{29} Truman’s 1949 Housing Act made a city’s physical, social and economic health a national goal. In it, Congress proclaimed “the goal of a decent home and a suitable living environment for every American family, thus contributing to the development and redevelopment of community.” It included a “slum clearance” program that authorized public agencies to acquire and demolish areas designated “blighted.” “A History,” \url{www.hud.gov}, accessed July 28, 2012.

\textsuperscript{30} Doyle, \textit{Nashville Since the 1920s}, 126.
besides suburban flight included transformation through religious reform and eradication of the blighted space through city development supported by national goals and funds. Nashville was growing into a modern city, one becoming further segregated by race and class through zoning laws and public housing with the poor increasingly being treated as out of place and removed for the sake of the city’s progress.

1950-2012: Placing the homeless in Nashville today

As Nashville faced further suburbanization and redeveloped its city in the late twentieth century, it transformed the geography of the transient poor that was gathering together primarily in one area, Lower Broad. Downtown Nashville began losing retailers to the suburbs as early as the 1950s when the construction of Interstates 24, 40 and 65 that wrapped around and met in the city center, provided more connections to outlying shopping locations. As department and furniture stores migrated out to suburban shopping malls over the years, the sex industry began moving into the Lower Broad district, and the adult entertainment lodged itself between the remaining stores, pawn shops, and country music tourist spots of honky-tonks and western wear souvenirs. One guitar store owner on 4th Avenue behind the Grand Ole Opry recalls the changing and mixed neighborhood in the mid 1960’s: “When I came it had lots of winos, pimps, hookers, and massage parlors. It was colorful. But for the most part it was nonviolent. It was sleazy but it was the one block where if any visitor in town was going to come to see

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31 Doyle, *Nashville Since the 1920s*, 109. Also see, Williams, 47.
the music, that was the block.” The withdrawal of the retail businesses from Nashville’s CBD happened slowly over twenty years and culminated in 1974 when the Grand Ole Opry, sitting at one end of Lower Broadway’s businesses in the Ryman since 1943, planned to move to the Donelson suburbs. The Ryman, country music’s “mother church,” was under plans to be demolished.

It was during this time of downtown’s changing features that two of Nashville’s four primary homeless service providers, the Nashville Men’s Rescue Mission and the Salvation Army, found a place at one end of Lower Broad. Both the Mission and the Salvation Army exemplify the evangelical religious reform response to the issue of poverty. The Mission, a Fundamentalist Evangelical organization, started in 1953 as a two-room storefront on 4th Avenue and McGavock Street as a result of a religious revival held in the Ryman (a fitting place that echoes of late 19th century Tom Ryman’s own revival conversion experience to aid the city’s poor along Broadway). As the revival goers listened to Charles Fuller, a Gospel radio preacher from California and then to Jimmy Stroud, a former homeless man who testified to the Memphis Gospel Mission changing his life, some were inspired to start an offering plate for Nashville’s own homeless men’s Rescue Mission. Meanwhile, the Salvation Army was on 4th and Commerce Street and trying to make claims on the tavern-heavy space: with their concern for the sin of drink, they brought in “pretty girl cadets” from Atlanta to do

34 See Williams, “Down and Out,” 47.
“raids” on the bars along Commerce Street with religious tracts for conversion. Nashville’s Captain Gaugh explained their raids as “collecting people for God…we like to think of ourselves as sowers of the seed…there’s a certain need for some kind of more wholesome situation.”

By 1960, the Salvation Army was in need of more space to serve the homeless and relocated its headquarters to 600-602 Demonbreun, one block from the Mission’s new location, 129 7th Avenue South. In 1968, the Mission, pressed by a group of local churchwomen and the wives of board members, began offering shelter to homeless women as well. By the late 1960’s, if the Ryman and its seedy country music world held down one end (the north) of Lower Broad, these homeless shelters anchored the other (the south).

While some of Nashville’s transient population turned to the Mission and Salvation Army, many found low-income lodging through Single Room Occupancy (SRO) hotels situated throughout this district. Many of Nashville’s downtown hotels in Lower Broad that once had been used as part of Al Capone’s gangster speakeasies in the 1920s and then hosted country music stars in the 1940s and 50s had fallen into disrepair in the 1960s and been converted into SRO hotels. Jules Tabor, a local street poet and singer called the area “Dodge City-Skid Row.” The name, originating from the “skid road” that lumberjacks in the Northwest used for their logging camps along the Pacific coast, first designated places in the 1930’s where men could find temporary work and

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38 Doyle, Nashville Since the 1920s, 42, 125.
39 Eason in Rouda, The Street, 9. Also, see Williams, “Down and Out,” 49.
cheap living. Skid rows in most American cities emptied out during World War II when the men found work as factory hands and soldiers. This term continued to identify post-war places in cities that had sprung up around facilities helping homeless men who had been labeled as poor, lazy alcoholics. By 1970, Nashville’s “Dodge City Skid Row” had 1,680 SRO units offering those on the brink of homelessness (such as the elderly or those with seasonal jobs) cheap lodging accommodations and the possibility to retain some independent living. In sum, as Williams notes in his sociological account of this story, the city’s center was vacated with suburbanization in the 1950s and experienced years of disinvestment including the conversion of hotels into SRO’s, Lower Broad transformed into a Skid Row, a place for the derelict and their providers, the Mission and the Salvation Army.

Following the loss of the Grand Ole Opry in 1974 and much of the music business it attracted, Lower Broad decayed even more economically and socially. If one way to make place is through the processes of consumption, then this place, having gained a stigmatized identity and now disgusting to decent middle class and elite Nashvillians, drew a variety of people including the homeless looking to ease the tedium of their SRO hotel room or shelter life. Lower Broad became known as a place for “lawlessness” and was voted in the Nashville Scene’s Best of Nashville awards for “the place you most

41 Williams, “Down and Out,” 50.
42 For this theory on place-making see, Robert Sack. Homo Geographicus (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1997). Also see Williams, “Down and Out,” 51.
don’t want to be alone after dark.”43 Some of the area’s remaining “respectable” businesses complained of public intoxication. Almost 1500 persons’ names were in a Metro Police regular drunk file on this place and of them 300 were also filed as panhandlers; “winos” now migrating out from the Lower Broad area toward midtown scared locals who worried they would “mar the city’s image, scare away customers and tourists to Music City.”44 An architect told a local reporter that he had to drop his plans to remodel and rent out a building on 7th Avenue North because the Lower Broad homeless had broken in and set fire to it, even after multiple arrests.45

Some Lower Broad business owners and city officials blamed Lower Broad’s seedy reputation on the Mission’s presence that attracted the homeless to the area and, voicing a NIMBY attitude (Takahashi 1998), pushed for it to leave. A parking lot owner complained that more than half of those who bought spaces now wanted refunds because they were “too scared to walk by derelicts” at the Mission.46 The owner of Kantor Furniture said, all of these problems “go back to the Mission…it should be out in Bordeaux or somewhere away from the city’s downtown district.”47 Metro Councilman Phil Sadler called on the Mission “to fix your problem” of homeless drunks and threatened to shut it down and create a work farm paid for by a state alcohol where homeless men would be “sentenced.”48 The Mission had been at the center of a

45 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
controversy in the summer of 1979 when General Sessions Judge Sutton called for it to relocate because he deemed it had “created” Lower Broad’s problem of public intoxication. Judge Sutton compared homeless alcoholics at the Mission to sex workers: “They are just like prostitutes. You can’t keep them from prostituting, but you can get them off the streets.” Carl Resener, executive director of the Mission, felt it was being wrongfully maligned and insisted that the area’s problem wasn’t the Mission but Lower Broad’s high number of liquor stores. He defended the Mission’s presence in Lower Broad: “we are needed downtown where people who need us can find us and get to us without too much difficulty.” Resener pointed out that there the homeless are more than alcoholics; the city could get rid of all the “drunks and hobos” downtown and it would still be able to fill the Mission with homeless persons.

Resener’s main concern that he repeatedly voiced was eradicating the primary cause of homelessness. For him, that was deinstitutionalization, the national program that massively reduced the number of beds in mental hospitals in the 1960-70s. The money, which funded these beds, was meant to be used for halfway centers, teaching people to live independently before moving into permanent housing arrangements. Overall, the community-based care arrangements were inadequate to meet the demands

51 Ibid.
53 Bill Fletcher, “Wino Work Farm.”
created by deinstitutionalization. The plan to save costs and grant more independence and quality-of-life to mentally ill persons instead created the conditions for widespread homelessness among the mentally ill. At a panel discussion sponsored by Davidson Country Association for Retarded Citizens and the Mental Health Association in Nashville, Resener said that the Mission and the streets had been a catchall for patients released from the mental hospitals without housing. Between 1963-1986, residents at Tennessee’s five mental health institutions decreased from nearly 8,000 to less than 1500, but even a five-fold increase of state and federal funding had been unable to meet the demand for affordable housing programs for the mentally ill. Nashville community mental health centers, established by federal law in the early 1960s, were supposed to take over as care providers where the state hospitals left off, but state funding of these centers was unable to keep pace with inflation. Bed space in Tennessee psychiatric hospitals was so limited that mentally ill were turned away unless they presented an emergency situation where they could do violence to themselves or others. Resener worried that many mentally incompetent people were out on the streets simply because

56 After an increase in instances of suicide and pedophile attempts, Resener finally refused referrals from the Middle Tennessee Health Institute of patients who had a history of violence or criminal behavior in 1989. This is worth noting because it illustrates how the homeless shelter, a place for those out of place and itself vulnerable to being displaced and stigmatized, seems to be participating in that with the mentally ill whom they experiences as being “dumped” on them. Bill Snyder, “Some Mentally Ill Find City Streets Their Only Home,” *The Tennessean*, February 23, 1982.
they were “so nice and gentle and could not commit an act of violence” that would get them to shelter.\footnote{Tom Rogers, “Mental Patients’ Release Questioned at Meeting,” \textit{The Tennessean}, February 2, 1981.}

Significantly, Resener told a local journalist that the real reason for the sudden public interest in the removal of the Mission from Lower Broad was the city planners’ need for land in light of their decision to build the Nashville Convention Center in that district.\footnote{Carolyn Shoulder, “Mission Head Asks for Apology for Criticism,” \textit{The Tennessean}, August 17, 1982.} Harvey Molotch, a sociologist of metropolitan studies, has done work on how places happen and anchor into an urban space for long-term continuity. He theorizes about “a mode of lash-up” in which something happens in one place and then reemerges in another place due to different factors that coalesce together beyond its own working: “An array of physical and social elements cohere in a given locale through a ‘lash-up’ of co-occurences. Rather than resulting from one kind of force overpowering another…things exist in the world through the ‘success’ of connections among various forces and across material and ideational realms.”\footnote{Harvey Molotch, “History Repeats Itself, But How?: City, Character, Urban Tradition, and the Accomplishment of Place,” 793.} Such “things” start in one place but re-assemble in another due to the sum influence of interdependent forces, both obvious and hidden, that are working themselves out to make and then reinforce place. Molotch finds that as places are produced, they may find a stability that is “neither preordained nor
frozen in content” but rather is a kind of “rolling inertia” allowing for a “continuous flux within a stable mode of operation.”

Downtown Nashville’s Skid Row in Lower Broad that will be destroyed for the development of the Nashville Convention Center and later addition of the Arena illustrates what Molotch calls a “mode of lash-up,” whereby the homeless situated in variety of places from SRO hotels to shelters all re-emerge in new places due to factors beyond their control: revitalization initiatives, historic preservation, criminalization of homeless living practices, and the wants and fears of business and residential neighbors. The homeless do not simply scatter and disappear, never to be heard from again. City politics, the economy, and social forces are all at work in redeveloping downtown Nashville and the homeless and their service providers are in a state of what Molotch calls “rolling inertia” or what Williams calls “roller[ing] through time” in the midst of the city’s growth and changes.

The back story of why Nashville’s homeless skid row in Lower Broad “lashed up” into new places (North Nashville, East Nashville, a Tent City, and the Lafayette District) begins in what Williams notes as an “unlikely” event: Nashville’s Bi Centennial Celebration in 1980. Mayor Fulton established a Steering Committee to make plans for the city’s 200th birthday celebration. Their plans included beautification of the property along the Cumberland River on 1st Avenue with a new Riverfront Park (that would become the pet project of the Mayor’s wife) and a Convention Center, nearly 275,000

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60 Molotch, “History Repeats Itself,” 894.
square feet of meeting, exhibit, and event space. It would be comprised of a 50,000 seat stadium, a 100,000 foot exhibition hall, a 17,000 seat arena, parking structures, restaurants, and hotels. Projections for its annual revenue generation reached over $30 million.

As the Convention Center’s proposed site was being debated among local construction and commercial real estate companies and politicians, Lower Broad was being considered, not as a potential Center site, but rather as a district for historic preservation. In the last part of the 20th century with the National Historic Preservationist Act (1966) and then the celebration of the nation’s own bi-centennial in 1976, real interest burgeoned in historic preservation. Historic preservationist movements have worked to save older buildings and return them to their original state with the hope of providing a sense of past and maintaining communal memories in changing modern cities. As such, the principles of historic preservation place a high premium on history and have been found lacking by some sociologists who say they are merely based on the current aesthetic preferences and values of gentrification held by upper-middle class.

In 1980 Metro’s Historic Commission successfully petitioned to put Lower Broad on the National Historic Register in hopes primarily of saving the Ryman and a street

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63 Doyle, Nashville Since the 1920s, 264-65.
64 Martha Vanderber, “Fulton Backs N. Nashville Center Site,” The Tennessean, February 27, 1980.
65 For an in-depth exploration of the historic preservation fight in Nashville, See Williams, “Down and Out,” 59-63.
66 Doyle, Nashville Since the 1920s, 270-71.
with great country music heritage; the petition also placed a hotel, the Merchant’s, built in 1892, on the list of historic buildings to be preserved. Given a name from its first customers, salesmen coming on the riverboats and trains to do business along Broad Street, its clientele shifted in the 1930-40’s to more country music tourists and singers because of its proximity to the Ryman. By the 1960-70s it was catering to a low-income clientele and had fallen into disrepair. The MHC’s successful petition began a mass displacement for the homeless who had found SRO hotels to be a sanctuary of last resort. In saving the past with historic sites like Merchant’s, the historic preservation impulse that identifies a building or street worth preserving also destroys the precarious dwelling places of the extremely poor.

Lower Broad’s addition to the National Historic Register due largely to its country music history connections with the Ryman gave it more cultural cache, so as Williams notes in this story, Mayor Fulton sensed a political and economic opportunity to place the Bicentennial Convention Center in this newly assigned historical district. After all, it was within walking distance of the hoped for Riverfront Park, and he had gotten a proposal from a Chattanooga developer for building a 22-story hotel on top of the Center if placed across from the Ryman. In 1981, he suggested a new site for the Convention

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69 Ibid.
70 No author, “Convention Center to Open this Week after Rocky Decade,” The Tennessean, January 25, 1987. Also, see Williams, “Down and Out,” 69.
Center—the land on 5th Avenue and Commerce, across from the Ryman, also one block away from Downtown Presbyterian Church.\(^{71}\)

Importantly, Mayor Fulton included the Convention Center plan as a part of a greater redevelopment program extending down Commerce.\(^{72}\) Under Tennessee state law, a redevelopment plan gives the local housing authorities the power “to acquire blighted areas and other property for the purpose of removing, preventing, or reducing blight, blighting factors, or the causes of blight.”\(^{73}\) Tennessee law defines “blighted areas” as slums or buildings that due to “dilapidation, obsolescence, overcrowding, lack of ventilation, light and sanitary facilities, deleterious land use, or any combination of these or other factors, are detrimental to the safety, health, morals, or welfare of the community…”\(^{74}\) The redevelopment program for downtown Nashville’s new convention center and park is allowed by law to remove stigmatized spaces for the “welfare of the community.” In practice, the “community” was equated with those in place, the business elites and middle class, and while their economic and social benefits are defended, the wellbeing of the extremely poor living on the margins of communities is not.

The greater redevelopment project area included razing more SRO hotels, so in addition to the Merchant Hotel, now more homeless persons were at risk of eviction with the heralding of the Convention Center. They are, as place theorist Cresswell would say, “anchoristic” (2004). The presence of these transient occupants did not support the city’s

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\(^{71}\) Ibid.
\(^{74}\) Ibid.
vision of progress whereby Downtown Nashville could be made into a strong business center while also retaining its historic charm and ties to its country music past. That the fate of the street people on Lower Broad’s Skid Row—along with their homeless service providers—depends on and is dictated by the city’s own desire for progress, shows how little power those out of place have.

Re-making “blighted” city space to be more in line with the city’s progressive goals requires a police control effort legitimated by the idea that downtown was morally corrupt and in need of reclaiming. As the city began reconstructing over five blocks of sidewalks and landscaping to connect the Convention Center with the Riverfront Park from 1st to 5th Avenue, the police presence increased in this downtown public space. They made backdoor raids on Lower Broad adult businesses as well as arrests of homeless persons outside.\textsuperscript{75} The Metro Public Health and Metro Codes Departments, supported by the Broadway Revitalization Committee and Historic Preservationists, held unannounced inspections of Lower Broad’s adult entertainment businesses that failed to meet inspection standards for clean restrooms.\textsuperscript{76} The inspections were conducted as a direct result of the 1982 Bicentennial redevelopment plans, for among the surprise inspection tours were the SRO hotels located near or at the Convention Center’s planned site. One of them was the 1927 Sam Davis which, like the Merchant’s, had transformed from lodgings for country musicians and Grand Ole Opry fans into a provisional home for 150

\textsuperscript{75} Williams, “Down and Out,” 76-80.
of Nashville’s otherwise homeless renting single rooms for $31.50 a week.\textsuperscript{77} The Sam Davis was placed on a 24-hour fire watch and then condemned in court for hazardous conditions. Interestingly, the Metro Codes inspector’s assessment implies that the hotel’s hazardous condition was not the real obstruction, but its kind of inhabitant: “Structurally, it’s not in bad shape…it is just like so many old hotels—they can not maintain the clientele to keep them going good.”\textsuperscript{78}

Destroying the Lower Broad SRO’s presented a problem to the homeless occupants as well as homeless service providers. This would be a \textit{permanent} removal of hundreds of units from the shelter system that \textit{would not be replaced}. The desk clerk of the Sam Davis hotel, after learning of its looming demise, had told a local reporter, “These people are like family to me…You have to listen to all of the heartaches and financial problems. I am going to miss them, and I worry about some of them, about what they are going to do.”\textsuperscript{79} In February of 1985, the Sam Davis Hotel was torn down, making way for a corner of the Convention Center’s parking lot. Mayor Fulton reassured the public that the poor residents are “better off” because at least they had the option of participating in a “government relocation program” and would be given relocation payments and not “simply be put out on the street.”\textsuperscript{80} One evicted resident, David

\textsuperscript{78} Dwight Lewis, “Firefighter Watch Ordered for Hotel,” \textit{The Tennessean}, November 3, 1984. Also, see Williams, “Down and Out,” 84.
\textsuperscript{80} Ed Gregory, “Sam Davis Hotel’s Owners Invite City Condemnation Suit,” \textit{The Tennessean}, August 23, 1983.
Gaylor, a 66-year-old Army Air Corps retiree who had previously split time between the Mission and the Savoy SRO Hotel until it was torn down for a parking garage admitted, “I don’t know where in the world I’m going from here.”

Losses of SRO hotels (in addition to low income boarding homes condemned by the inspections) overwhelmed homeless service providers: the Mission had a 300-bed capacity, the Salvation Army had 50 beds, and both often referred homeless Nashvillians to SRO hotels. The homeless shelters fought to keep SRO hotels open, blamed “gentrification” for the permanent loss of low-income housing, and predicted homeless numbers would rise. Resener especially fought to keep SRO hotels as an option for the poor living in downtown and in a two hour special council committee public hearing, he argued that this “Hotel Demolition Derby” led to a rise in homelessness. Resener understood how the consequences of Nashville’s “progress” for downtown would impact the extremely poor:

The Sam Davis Hotel is not the kind of place where you and I may want to live, but for these people it is their home of last resort. A place like the Sam Davis is unique, where somebody can make a life for himself on an income of $300 a month. They know how to manage their lives...But the whole basis of their survival is having a hotel to live

81 Ibid.
82 For the boarding homes, see Randy Hilman, “Boarding Home’s Doors Closing,” The Tennessean, July 21, 1984. For the bed count, see Williams, “Down and Out,” 86.
84 Resener would unsuccessfully attempt to enlist others to donate $7.5 million to buy the vacant downtown Sheraton so congregations could sponsor beds in order to provide over 300 units of cheap housing. Ray Waddle, “Resener hopes to buy the Sheraton for homeless,” The Tennessean, April 21, 1988.
in...When it is gone, they will start drifting. They will stay at the mission for a month or two, and then they will become a part of the forgotten society.  

As Williams tells this story, Resener’s prediction came true: according to one local sociologist’s study, between 1983-1985, as the city demolished and remodeled Lower Broad property needed not just for the Convention Center but also for the parking garages to accommodate the return of downtown shoppers, the number of Nashvillians living on the street doubled.  

He warned that crowds at the Mission would scare off many of those struggling to find shelter and thought that the city would see more people “live under bridges, in alleys, and in other out-of-the-way places” as well as more people “sleeping in parked cars.”  

Indeed, camps cropped up including a long-standing one, Tent City, which formed along the Cumberland River. A punitive police response ensued as policing of and bans on encampments of highway underpasses. In defense of its criminalizing living in these spaces, The Department of Transportation voiced concern for the public safety. As law officials arrested transients who camped out there as a last effort at creating some shelter, Resener decried their police crackdowns as being less about concern for public safety and more about wanting to get rid of the homeless who were viewed as less-than-human: “I think that people are getting tired of seeing

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86 Beth Fortune, “Expert calls lack of transient housing a disgrace,” The Tennessean, August 15, 1986. Also, see Williams, “Down and Out,” 86.
89 Tam Gordon, “Sam Davis was ‘Last Resort’ for Many of the City’s Homeless,” Banner, November 22, 1984.
them…But they are people, too.” In a telling statement, Resener captured the lash-up process occurring to the homeless: “The police are apparently trying to break up their nests, but their nests are just going to move somewhere else.” The repeated cycle of being forced to move their nests somewhere reveals how the homeless are stigmatized and perceived as matter out of place.

At this time, one priest recognized the humanity in the homeless and stepped up to offer “nest” space to them. As city redevelopment dwindled the homeless population’s options for shelter, A Room In the Inn, one of city’s largest homeless providers emerged. In the late fall of 1986, Father Charlie Strobel says in an interview that he “witnessed” for the first time the existence of great numbers of homeless persons. Looking out his bedroom window at Holy Name Catholic Church, numbers of Nashvillians were using the church parking lot as their overnight shelter in their cars: “I couldn’t reconcile their need with my own comfort and I began inviting them inside to sleep.” Interpreting this experience in light of communion meals and Luke 2.7, he soon he asked churches across the city to do the same—to host them for a meal which the non-homeless and homeless shared together, and offer them lodging, a place to shower and do laundry, and then breakfast the following morning before transporting them to a specified location. Other churches became involved and they grew the city’s capacity to provide shelter. Although A Room in the Inn was sheltering the homeless primarily through churches across the

91 Ibid.
92 Interview with Charlie Strobel, June 5, 2011. Also, see Williams, “Down and Out, 90-91.
city, the Salvation Army gave Father Strobel’s program space in the warehouse on its 600-602 Demonbreun Street property as a large centralized shelter location. The program became fully incorporated into this end of Lower Broad when A Room in the Inn moved into a building owned by the city’s Department of Housing that was located at 6th Avenue and Demonbreun.93

The year 1987 marked a time when two major homeless shelters, the Women’s Mission and the Salvation Army, found themselves in the process of lashing-up into new locations where residents pushed back from a fear of their stigmatizing presence. With the removal of SRO housing options and the subsequent increase in housing, the Women’s Mission found it had outgrown its 20-bed dormitory quarters at 705 Demonbreun (one block from the men). They also were facing higher rental prices as Lower Broad’s redevelopment and historical preservation move had added to the value of the district’s property.94 The father of a Mission board member, Jack Spence, owned property at 1716 8th Ave North. It had been used as a dumping ground, and years before that, was a part of the Hell’s Half Acre slums. Spence wanted to donate the trash property for the site of a new Women’s Mission. The property was cleaned up and facilities opened in May 1987 as the “Family Life Center.” Within seven months of its opening, more than 1,000 women and 250 children had spent at least one night at the facility and the Center was averaging over 30 children each month.95

95 Ragan, For Those We Serve: At the Nashville Union Rescue Mission, 41-2.
The Women’s Mission relocation was controversial. Residents and business owners near 8th Avenue North first expressed their NIMBY sentiments when they went before the Board of Zoning Appeals on a parking issue to ask that the Women’s Mission be given less parking space required for a building for transients.96 They returned to the Board of Zoning Appeals to get rid of the entire facility on the grounds that their district’s commercial zoning laws did not allow any “permanent residential use” which is what the Women’s Mission would allow—indefinite and prolonged residence of the homeless in its shelter. “We don’t want those people in our area,” said Metro Councilman Jack London, “Who knows what will happen? Nobody can control them. The crime rate will probably even go up.”97 The Board of Zoning voted unanimously in favor of the shelter.98 One homeowner, John Arnold, living behind this property under construction said several homeless persons were already knocking on his door and asking for directions to the shelter, and he worried, “no telling how many will be out there, wallowing in their yards and all.”99 Councilman London surmised from the new center’s construction that it was just the “first step” in a homeless migration with the Men’s Mission soon to be following.100 Countering London’s concerns for a flooding of homeless persons in his district and his contention that prolonged stays at the women’s shelter would violate law, Mission Director Resener pointed out the contradiction of the

97 Ibid.
98 Gail McKnight, “Women’s Shelter Approved by the Board,” *The Tennessean*, September 26, 1986.
99 Ibid. My italics.
city council that says it wants to help the homeless, but individual council members “run back to the neighborhood and say, ‘not in my neighborhood you’re not going to do it.’”

Like the Women’s Mission, the Salvation Army illustrates a lash-up process and the difficulties for those seen as transgressors of a place. Displacement and relocation was not a new experience for the Salvation Army. In 1960, they had been forced into selling their East Nashville men’s rehabilitation and 120-bed shelter for the Louisville leg of Interstate 65. In many cities, new highways to connect growing suburbs to the downtown area for work commutes were being built through the middle of low income neighborhoods of color, such as this one. The Salvation Army relocated its thrift store and a smaller shelter-rehabilitation center to property still in East Nashville on 140 North 1st Street by the river.

By the mid 1980s, the Salvation Army also found themselves overwhelmed by the growth in homelessness and in need of larger quarters. Citing the construction of the Nashville Convention Center and demolition of low income housing as reasons for a move, their first two attempts to move had been rejected—once, because a community agency declined to trade spaces and be in the vicinity of Lower Broad’s apparent chaos, another, because the neighbors at South 1st Street petitioned not to have a homeless shelter in their community. By Jan. 1987, the Salvation Army focused on consolidating their headquarters at their North 1st Street Thrift Store and Men’s (now

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101 Ibid.  
103 Williams, “Down and Out,” 89-90.
Adults) Shelter-Rehab program. They planned to expand services with short-term housing (fifty more beds for men) and long-term housing (apartments with sixty more beds for families) as well as limited day services.\(^{104}\)

The Salvation Army bought warehouses on six acres of land adjacent to their space, but quickly discovered their growing presence was unwelcomed by a group of area property owners who fought their relocation at an April zoning hearing.\(^{105}\) Car dealer E.B. Smith voiced concern that the presence of the homeless would hurt his property’s value and delay development while Ben Betty of Betty Machine Company on Russell Street added that he was “vehemently” opposed not to the Salvation Army but to their “dumping” the homeless in East Nashville when “we’ve already got our share.”\(^{106}\)

“There is no good place for that type of facility,” said attorney Larry Snedeker, representing North 1st Street property owners.\(^{107}\)

East Nashville councilpersons admitted to feeling pulled by what they saw as an ethical dilemma. They were aware that the Salvation Army had made a place in Nashville for nearly a century to aid the poor through religious reform and perceived as a good its “hand-up not hand-out” approach where, in order to stay at the shelter, men were required to work forty hours a week and attend three weekly chapel services.\(^{108}\) Councilpersons knew they needed to find places for the shelters to care for the growing

\(^{105}\) Ibid.  
\(^{107}\) Ibid. My italics.  
numbers of homeless persons, but none wanted to welcome a perceived “blight” into their community, particularly when businesses were attempting to upgrade downtown areas and continue Nashville’s progress. Councilman Willis McAllister, one of the few who was willing to vote in favor of the Salvation Army’s shelter expansion on North 1st Street, explains: “We try to put them in a residential area; they don’t want it. We put it in an industrial area; they don’t want them. What are we to do with them then, toss them into Russia? They’ve got to be somewhere and I’m voting for it.”¹⁰⁹ When the council decided to postpone action until July 1987, Salvation Army Captain White used the next few months to go on a kind of public relations campaign to correct “misinformation” for East Nashvillians. Realizing that many citizens formed their opinions of homelessness based on recent media stories and frightening images of Lower Broad, Captain White assured them that the Salvation Army shelter would not “attract the wrong kind of people—like those on Lower Broad” and they would not bring Lower Broad’s problems to East Nashville.¹¹⁰

Thinking the removal of more permanent housing might allay fears, Captain White attempted to compromise and revamped their plans to leave out the long-term family housing. However, this move to appease East Nashvillians only enraged them. Councilman Summers found the transient male housing “more offensive” because

homeless men “posed the greatest threat to [their] safety.” He quickly filed a bill to do two things: prohibit the Salvation Army from establishing a transient shelter unless it was part of a planned public housing development and limit transient shelters to the immediate downtown district and interchange of highways. At this point, the East Nashville Residential Association began to meet and voice their concern about having more homeless persons near their local park on Woodland and Russell. Parents worried about the safety of their children already seeing homeless persons “asleep and drunk” on benches. Councilman Summers met with them and supported their concerns that they only wanted to be able “to maintain a decent community.” Captain White shot back through a local journalist, “All we get from the City Council and others is where we can’t build and shelter the homeless. No one has told us where we can go.”

That July 1987, the Salvation Army’s plans to expand its services in East Nashville were dealt three blows. First, the Council passed Summer’s bill that worked to eliminate places for needed shelters. Following on this bill’s heels was a resolution filed by Summers to condemn the Salvation Army’s East Nashville property in hopes of forcing them to remain in Lower Broad. Finally, the Metro Board of Zoning Appeals voted against the Salvation Army’s request to increase the codes limit on the 7 day length

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of stay in an industrial zone to 30 days or longer.\textsuperscript{115} Despite these three setbacks, the Salvation Army worked within its confined parameters and finally obtained a building permit. The North 1st Street area property owners immediately tried to revoke the Salvation Army’s permit by filing a lawsuit. Their efforts were unsuccessful; within a few months, on Oct 24, 1987, the Salvation Army quietly opened a lodge for transient men who were only able to stay six nights every six months, but it was a small victory.\textsuperscript{116} By the early 1990s, more homeless providers were being squeezed out of Lower Broad by political and economic processes at work and relocated to their current place in the Lafayette District. Ultimately, what pushes these last homeless shelters out of Lower Broad is another redevelopment initiative to continue Lower Broad’s revitalization efforts: in 1993, Mayor Phil Bredesen proposed to construct a $120 million entertainment arena that would reinforce the city’s reputation as Music City, USA and boost economic growth.\textsuperscript{117} The new arena site was to be located across from the Convention Center along Broadway and McGavock on one side and Demonbreun on the other as it stretched from 5\textsuperscript{th} to 7\textsuperscript{th} Avenues. The project area would descend upon the place of the homeless services. The head of the Arena project said that although current plans didn’t require any of the homeless service property, he could not assure them that the arena would not eventually affect the shelters and recommended that they consider moving.\textsuperscript{118} The

\textsuperscript{117} Patricia Templeton, “Shelter Bids for Old Sears Building,” \textit{The Tennessean}, July 9, 1993. Also, see Williams, “Down and Out,” 100-102.
\textsuperscript{118} Glenn Henderson, “Angered over Arena Plan,” \textit{Banner}. 103
Mission and Room in the Inn quickly saw that the Arena spelled out their end. Father Strobel shared in our interview that “A Room in the Inn was just caught. Yeah, there was pressure. We were strongly encouraged to move.” The new arena’s construction depended in part on homeless providers cooperating with the city planners and relocating. Between 1995-1998, first A Room in the Inn and then the Mission relocated south of Lower Broad to the Lafayette neighborhood. First, A Room in the Inn settled into an old warehouse on 8th Avenue South, then The Mission, outbid by the city government in purchasing the former Salvation Army location on Lower Broad and then prevented in buying a motel on Murfreesboro Road by neighboring businesses, finally bought a vacated Sears building on 7th Avenue South. Even as the Arena’s construction is forcing the homeless and their shelters to relocate, that new location, deemed necessary by the city planners for “the welfare of the community” (so, the state law), doesn’t want them: one businessman protested the Mission’s move into the former Sears Building because it would allow the Mission to increase its capacity to 1400 men and so add to the “vagrancy” in downtown: “if they are already having problems in controlling 400 men, what’s going to happen when 1,000 more of them are added?”

With the city’s endless redevelopment plans, much of the transient population did leave downtown Nashville’s Lower Broad, thus enabling the city to come closer to its goal of erasing “blight” from its space. The four main shelters that the extremely poor used—the Women’s Mission, the Salvation Army, A Room in the Inn, and the Men’s

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119 Ragan, For Those We Serve, 87-91.
Mission—were taken apart and then re-emerged in different locations, often with difficulty due to perceptions of them as stigmatized transgressors and often not by their own accord. The “lash-up” illustrated by the repeated displacement and contentious relocations of different homeless service providers is also found among Nashville’s homeless persons who chose to make a camp village, “Tent City,” along the banks of the Cumberland River.121

That I cannot locate Tent City by common means such as Mapquest and GoogleMap attests both to what Tent City’s homeless residents hoped to achieve and were forced into creating: they put together a communal living area hidden from plain sight. Tent City provided shelter for those forced out of homes in the development of downtown, fearful of the Mission being too crowded and unsafe, and fleeing other camps that had been found and cited by Metro. Many brought pets—or took in another homeless creature—because this was a place that did not force the homeless to give up their animals even in the face of abject poverty.122 Veterans wanting more freedom and personal space came, as did couples who refused to be separated by the same-sex shelter system. Shacks were made from material found at a nearby dump and latrines were dug by hand. A communal fire pit was at the center of Tent City and served as a kind of outdoor living room.123 They created a clean beach area to enjoy concerts at Riverfront Park, across from them, or to play with their dogs. The police was aware of it and

allowed it to co-exist in the shadow of downtown. In short, Tent City, while not without problems of drinking and fighting, could provide the homeless with more privacy and freedom than other shelter options and was another attempt at survival when downtown pushed them out of its normalized space.

This makeshift camp village was ever on the verge of displacement. For over twenty years, the camp’s numbers fluctuated but typically stayed at under 25 until the summer of 2007 when it grew over five times its size. Homeless persons were fleeing increased aggressive police efforts and downtown neighbors supporting a “Please Help, Don’t Give” anti-panhandlers campaign. Inner City Ministry, that had been enjoying a good relationship with Tent City’s residents, began to feel the effects of the encampment’s population growth. Concerned about fires, the presence of known sex offenders, and the smell of raw sewage, the following summer of 2008, Inner City Ministry contacted Metro Public Works that set out to eradicate the homeless camp. A group of homeless and formerly homeless persons, clergy, and their service providers met with Public Works which agreed to delay the scheduled eviction if certain conditions were met including providing dumpsters and port-a-potties and refusing access to any newcomers at the camp. A knife incident by a non-resident put Tent City on eviction notice once again, but another meeting convinced Metro government officials to stand off when homeless advocate, Clemmie Greenlee pointed out, “shootings and stabbings occur
all the time in the projects but we don’t run everyone out of there, so why should we here?”

What finally brought down Tent City and displaced its residents was not urban redevelopment but the Cumberland River. In early 2010, another threat to the place of Tent City came with planned bridge repairs, but before the closure date came, a natural disaster hit all of Nashville May 1 and 2, 2010. The Great Flood washed the entire camp village in contaminated river water, sewage, and diesel fuel. As the waters rose, about 140 Tent City residents gathered on higher ground where they met Doug Sanders, an outreach minister from Otter Creek Church, who used their bus to transport them to a Red Cross Shelter set up for 3 months at David Lipscomb University and other Nashville churches.

In the wake of the flood, many Tent City residents received FEMA aid and approval for Section 8 housing vouchers and found their way to housing. Others unsuccessfully sought refuge in Church Street Park across from Downtown Presbyterian Church and the public library—a place the homeless claimed even before the flood because of its proximity to safe, legal spaces for bathrooms. Some former Tent City residents wanted to return to their site, but Metro Housing Commission had asked the police to patrol the campground. Councilman Erik Cole who heads the MHC said they

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124 Ibid.
126 Complaints from nearby business and residents about public drunkenness drew a greater police presence; the homeless and homeless service advocates told local reporters that the police were harassing them to leave but the police department denied that accusation. Brian Haas, “Patrols Reduce Complaints about Homeless in Park,” The Tennessean, August 21, 2010.
wanted to discourage a return to that “disgusting” and “gross” place and asked the police to give trespassing charges to make sure no one settled again.\(^\text{127}\)

Otter Creek Church of Christ Rev. Sanders approached one of his members, Lee Beaman, who agreed to let about 50 former Tent City residents temporarily relocate to two acres of his land in Antioch. A day after they set up camp, Antioch neighbors complained to Metro Codes and requested an inspection which condemned the makeshift camp violated zoning laws. (A new homeless encampment has to be two acres of land along a bus line and cannot be close to a school or daycare.) They were ordered to vacate the Beaman property within two days. Lone Wolf, a leader from Tent City wondered why they had to leave when “nobody bothers us and we don’t bother them.”\(^\text{128}\) Another homeless man said, “We are looked upon as cattle.” Ginger Stone, a 45-year-old homeless woman told a local reporter, “Nashville needs to be ashamed. All they care about are the tourists, but once those tourists leave, we’re still here. It’s like we’ve been dumped on and forgotten. They just want us out of sight, out of mind.”\(^\text{129}\)

Church leaders were among those in Antioch expressing anger over the homeless camp. Rodney Beard, pastor of Living Word Community Church, announced at a residents meeting “the gates of charity in Antioch are closed.”\(^\text{130}\) Beard later walked back his words, but his apology implies his own stigmatization of the homeless as

\(^{129}\) Ibid.
\(^{130}\) Ibid.
“matter out of place”: “I mean to say that Antioch is *not a place to put everything you don’t know what to do with...* I would that think everyone would have the feeling of not in my backyard.” Beard used economic progress to defend his position: “We have to build up the area to make it worthy for investment.” Although he recognized a church is meant to care for the poor, he articulated his responsibility to giving care and protection to those “who aren’t poor“ so that their “community” can “thrive” and find “unity.”

After the flood of 2010, one place that the former Tent City dwellers would no longer be able to turn to for assistance was the Salvation Army headquarters in East Nashville. When the Cumberland River crested over North 1st Street, it damaged the facility beyond repair. Forced to relocate, the Salvation Army found itself in a familiar role of facing opposition when they hoped to convert a Madison school into an adult rehabilitation center. It would house 80 men for up to six months. In hopes of calming fears, they promised 24-hour supervision and men leaving the site only to work at another Salvation Army facility. Madison neighbors went to the familiar NIMBY refrain where they voiced support for the Salvation Army’s religious mission but didn’t think it “belonged” in their neighborhood. The Salvation Army’s century-old thrift store-shelter program had come to its end. It would re-emerge two years later without a thrift store as a new and much smaller work placement program on Dickerson Pike.

Another chapter in this story remains to be told. The homeless shelters continue

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131 Ibid. My italics.
to be under threat to city development. The re-located Men’s Mission and A Room in the Inn’s Campus for Human Development in the Lafayette District are vulnerable yet again to being displaced in what may be another iteration in this “lash-up” process. They are situated in the last neighborhood area of SoBro that has been untapped by any major city project. With a $455 million building project of the new Music City Center underway and the Lafayette Street property owners complaining about the “uncomfortable” homeless presence negatively affecting their business, another displacement of the homeless presence may be approaching.\textsuperscript{134}

\textit{Conclusion: A Theological Reading of this Tale}

This tale of downtown Nashville’s on-going initiatives for revitalization—of placing Nashville on the map as a major city of economic growth that also has cultural and historic value—is simultaneously a story of displacement by the extreme poor. What creates a nicer place to live for some benefiting from Nashville’s economic growth and urban development may be experienced as displacement for others. Finding and maintaining a place as a transient or as the provider for transient persons is a precarious thing where they find themselves largely at the mercy of those in control of public space and caught in a vicious cycle: city investment-city disinvestment-city re-development of blighted area-displacement of blighted persons. These worldly matters are, as Paul Tillich would say, matters of ultimate concern to the homeless that impact how the homeless in

Nashville live out their faith. Such features of Nashville impact the homeless person’s spiritual wholeness and the kinds of religious experiences they have—what they pray for, where they do or do not encounter God, where they can or can’t find community. I hope to show in the remaining chapters that being treated as transgressors is a spiritual problem that can impact their lives of faith in profound ways that DPC’s homeless ministries aim to alleviate.

A historical perspective of the place making of Nashville, particularly downtown, shows that contemporary spatial activities meant to exclude or transform the extremely poor are not new. The place making “cleanup” practices of police—the unannounced sweeps and code inspections and arrests in the 1980s with Lower Broad and then the post-Flood citations and arrests in Tent City and Church Street Park—are not so different from those in the late 19th century vice districts. Today’s concern for the moral depravity of pockets of downtown like Lower Broad, particularly with public drunkenness of the destitute, were concerns about that same space over fifty years ago and over a century ago. Cleaning up Nashville’s streets was and is cast in moral terms that have inspired religious reformers to respond to the down-and-out. They have built on one another’s work and that impulse of religious reform continues in the work of homeless providers today. Finally, where the poor get placed is not new either: the Women’s Mission re-locates to what was once part of Hell’s Half Acre slum and the Men’s Mission and A Room in the Inn eventually settle into a corner of what was once Black Bottom. Today’s space that is given over—even conceded—to shelter the homeless has a long history of stigmatizing in terms of class and race.
The local newspapers capture the perspective of some residential neighborhoods, business owners, city officials and even church leaders not just about the stigmatized identity of Lower Broad, but about the stigma attached to the homeless shelters, and the homeless themselves who are seen as “matter out of place.” Many are repulsed by the disorder existing within the confines of Lower Broad, including places for the homeless like the Mission that gets blamed for the district’s seedy reputation. The local papers also capture the fear of some citizens that these deviant homeless bodies needing to be “controlled” could transgress into their own communities. Significantly, language invoking trash, dirt, and disease runs throughout the exclusionary discourse on the homeless and their current spaces as well as space they potentially could pollute. One of Resener’s popular titles in the media is “the saint of Nashville’s leper colony.”135 Business owners worry about the homeless being “dumped” on them. Tent City is “disgusting” and “gross.” The protests of a residential neighbor invoke images of swine: the homeless might “wallow in their yards.” Even the actual space that is given over to the Women’s Mission for their family center had been a dumping ground for litter. Clearly, how some citizens talk about the homeless and their shelter caregivers reveal that they are seen as committing the trespass of being a visible blight.

The local papers reveal that many Nashvillians want the religiously based shelters to do the good Christian work of caring for those in need, but not if it means sharing their own residential and commercial space. Some would prefer for the transient poor to

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disappear into the countryside to a “wino farm” or “be sent to Russia.” Some, like East Nashvillians with the Salvation Army, felt they had reached a tipping point and did not want any more homeless—that they were already doing their part in caring for the city’s needy. Even the Antioch pastor can’t imagine making room for homeless displaced by the flood and pronounced his community’s “gates closed” not to people or fellow citizens but to an objectified problem: “everything you don’t know what to do with.” The possibility of having the homeless live within their own communities and open up possibilities for face-to-face encounters repeatedly was seen not as redemptive but as threatening to personal safety or economic gain. It was seen not as an opportunity to meet Christ in another but as a disruption to classed spatial boundaries in which it is not proper or appropriate to do publicly things fundamental to living—eating, sleeping, using the bathroom—so they worked to keep the transient poor outside of their neighborhoods.

Community, then, emerges from all of this as a crucial issue. Many who fear the transient poor transgressing their neighborhood and business bounds want to maintain, as one councilman said “a decent community.” The question then becomes, what makes for a “decent” community, and how do those deemed indecent find and make community where they can be somewhere and appear as fully human?

In my introduction, I described stigma theologically as antithetical to God’s grace and a spiritual problem for the extreme poor. If one thing homeless persons have in common is a loss of power where they are on “the fringe” socially, politically, and economically (Wright 2005), then this loss of agency and full acceptance among others is a consequence of stigmatization or a state of dis-grace. Generally, the homeless in
Nashville have not been afforded a place to appear as whole citizens of the city’s communities. The homeless persons and the main services providing them shelter find themselves being directed by and forced to comply with the greater powers and forces at work in making the place of Nashville. Indeed Molotch’s term “rolling inertia” and William’s play on it, “roll[ing] through time” get at this powerlessness: the homeless and their shelters persist in existing, but where they exist depends on the forces that move or “roll” them along until they are out of progress’ way, if only for a time. This state of dis-grace is present in the escalation of “quality of life” arrests of the homeless whose SRO options, a last resort before the streets, are demolished for new convention centers embodying the city’s entrepreneurial vision for progress.

Finally in this tale of the place making of Nashville, the state of dis-grace is linked to and perpetuated by unholy classed and raced habituations of the non-homeless. My project, as I named my introduction, is practically theological because it starts with a relevant problem or “wound” (Fulkerson 2007) of homelessness and an important part of this wound of homelessness is the classed and raced habituations of the non-homeless in this tale who are so fearful of sharing their community space with the homeless shelters. The 19th century concern for sharing a park with Black Bottom slum dwellers (that signaled the waves of suburban white flight to come) is echoed in the 20th century NIMBY attitudes of the non-homeless concerned about their children seeing Salvation Army derelicts in their East Nashville parks: both wanted to avoid being in “mixed contact” (Goffman 1963) with the extreme poor. Their desire to keep the dis-graced at a distance stems from habituated fears and allows them to continue in their own
obliviousness and practice “attention deprivation” to the stranger (Snow and Anderson 1987, 1993). And the church is not immune to such habituations of fearing or being disgusted by the homeless stranger, as illustrated in one Antioch church’s response to the Tent City refugees from the 2010 Flood. Thus, this tale shows the ambiguous character of the church and how the body of Christ can participate in practicing stangerliness and perpetuating a state of dis-grace for the homeless.

Still, this tale has a few moments where I think God’s goodness appears in redemptive actions done in an ecclesial context. There is the Church of Christ pastor who provides shelter for the Tent City flood refugees at his church and asks a congregant to share his land with them and the congregant, indeed, makes room. The most good, I think, comes in Father Strobel’s witness to the homeless in need that cold night in 1986 and the homeless church programs born out of his witness. When Charlie Strobel sees the homeless and invites them into his church and subsequently starts a program to shelter and feed the homeless throughout churches in the city, he wanted them to enact his Eucharistic vision of the non-homeless and homeless communing over a meal. Certainly, A Room in the Inn’s form of being with the homeless does not necessarily disrupt the social and economic structures contributing to their extreme poverty, and I do not want to romanticize this program. I acknowledge that as a theologically trained person, it is easy for me to look at Strobel’s Eucharistic theology undergirding shared meals and mentally jump to an idealized vision all A Room in the Inn churches being
places where the non-homeless and homeless fellowship and build community. However, RITI does provide opportunities for interpersonal encounters of dignity where the homeless are treated as persons and can participate in a group (Partis 2003). Repeated face-to-face interactions can break down a middle class habitus of fear and the stigmatization of the extreme poor where the homeless can be seen as God’s Beloved—or as Strobel puts it “Living icons showing the face of Christ”—rather than matter out of place.

In fact, one of the homeless to whom I listened named A Room in the Inn’s Campus for Human Development as a sacred space. Running the risk of getting ahead of myself but wanting to hold myself to what I promised in my introduction (bringing the voices of those unheard to the center of scholarly theological work), I share two photographs by a homeless man of his sacred spaces (a subject to which I will return in Chapter 6). Bud, a 34-year-old African American man from Nashville who says he has spent the past several years being homeless off and on because of his criminal record and incarceration, took pictures of A Room in the Inn. He says that typically in a shelter, “there ain’t too much of God” but he explained why RITI is different for him:

Father Strobel is really a holy person. He provided a place for the homeless. Before RITI, we really had nowhere safe to go—maybe porches, staying all night to keep an eye out, I’ve done it. It’s comfortable. It’s clean. Girls can be at RITI and that makes a great difference. When you can see a women in your life, you take care of yourself,

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136 They are not necessarily disrupting the sinful social systems and economic structures that produce poverty. Although Williams does not use the language of sin to describe it, Williams makes an interesting argument for how A Room in the Inn’s central shelter downtown contributes to the men’s homelessness by keeping them reliant on their gift of shelter and trapped in their spatial routine and need of work with the nearby exploitative day laborers.
something to look forward to. You feel normal. You dream you can end up with a woman one day. (see figure 1.1)

Bud feels in touch with the transcendent when he has a place that is safe, a place where, through ordinary, simple interactions with the opposite sex, he can “feel normal” and be given something to hope for in his future. Bud also photographed a statue outside of the shelter and recounted its story that Father Strobel told him: “It’s a man, back in the day before Strobel. Strobel said he was rich. And he’s breaking bread. Like, he’s holding a peanut-butter and jelly sandwich in his two hands and holding one hand out to share it and eat it with the person and just talk to him.” (see figure 1.2)
Bud explained that the statue reminded him of Father Strobel with whom he feels close to God. He names the communion act (“breaking bread”) and leaves open-ended who is inviting him to share the sandwich—perhaps Father Strobel, perhaps the churches hosting Bud for dinners or the RITI volunteers—but his naming of the second Eucharistic movement, breaking, with this statute suggests, for me, that he can encounter God in face-to-face interactions with others who like Father Strobel or this statue, look at him as more than a transgressive blight.

This historical and recent purview of the place making of Nashville sets the stage for understanding something about the material conditions of the homeless I interview and observe. These material conditions shape their understanding of where and how they are (and are not) encountering God, and how they choose express their faith. It also sets the stage for understanding the formation and identity both of Downtown Presbyterian
Church and its three social worlds, the Wednesday Worship and Lunch, the Living Room, and the *Contributor* street paper. It is to this that I now turn.
Chapter 2

Formation Practices of DPC and its Homeless Social Worlds

If you [a homeless person] just shut up and listen, you’ll see this church is a one-stop shop for something to eat, and get help and worship and get hooked up with a job. To me that church is on fire on Wednesdays, all the ministry going on in that building. –Madge, a Living Room leader and formerly homeless person

Chapter 1 explored the history of the place making of Nashville, particularly its downtown which shows a pattern of the displacement of the extreme poor and blighted areas in what Molotch calls “a mode of lash-up” due to occurring, connecting forces from entrepreneurial development and suburbanization to the deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill and historic preservation. One of the features of this “lash-up” dislocating the homeless and their main shelters is repeated NIMBY pressure from business and residential neighbors, even churches. Such pressure reveals sinful classed and raced habituations to fear the homeless stranger. Dependent on and determined by these more powerful forces and pressures, the homeless and their shelters become a kind of “rolling inertia” (Molotch 2000) or in Williams’ capable telling of this story, “rolling through time.” As the homeless are treated as matter out of place, stigmas attached to homelessness are perpetuated, but this state of dis-grace finds some redemptive healing during the “lash up” when one priest’s Eucharistic actions and creation of RITI emphasize face to face encounters between homeless and non-homeless.

Within the place of Nashville, Downtown Presbyterian Church (DPC) and its three social worlds for the homeless, the Wednesday worship and lunch, the Living Room, and The Contributor, emerged to give the city’s transient poor a space to appear
as more than “matter out of place.” This second chapter will examine how both the church and these three homeless social worlds located there came into being. It will particularly look at their formation events, stories, and practices. In her ethnographic study of an interracial congregation that included people with disabilities, McClintock Fulkerson says formation practices are “activities of self-definition” that “can coalesce into a claimed identity.” DPC’s primary formational event for its identity as an urban church was a schism largely due to suburbanization, one of the factors Chapter 1 described in the “lash-up” dislocating the homeless. Once DPC emerged as and embraced its identity as an urban church, social worlds for the homeless came into being. Many founders of the homeless ministries pointed out that they did not intend to start a ministry at DPC, rather their work with the homeless “just happened” to take them to the church because of its downtown place in Nashville. The formative stories of the Wednesday worship and lunch, the Living Room, and The Contributor will show that most of their founders’ commitments and each group’s self-identities are less about a Presbyterian denominational mission or doctrinal beliefs and more about the way pastors and laity work out their own interpretation of Christian stories and their understanding of the divine in light of their personal experiences of recognizing the humanity of homeless persons—or, for some leaders who are formerly homeless, in light of their experiences of street life and where they found places to appear as more than stigmatized. Since the church and its social worlds for the homeless are “threaded with ambiguity” and since a

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community’s identity is always in the process of being renegotiated, each will be
stretched and at times limited in their faith-fully giving the homeless a place to appear
fully human.2

The Place of Downtown Presbyterian Church Emerges

Instead of Gethsemane, Agony, Resurrection, the story of Downtown Church follows the
sequence of Agony, Resurrection, Gethsemane. –James Pilkerton, Deacon, Elder and founding
member of DPC, 19573

DPC came into being within the landscape of Nashville as early as 1815 when six
Presbyterian women and one man came together at the old Davidson County courthouse
and organized Old First Church, the city’s first church of any denomination.

Presbyterians had begun their work in Nashville about sixty years earlier in 1785 since
the founder of Nashville James Robertson Donelson, a Presbyterian, welcomed a
preaching missionary from Kentucky, Rev Craighead.4 The present church building on
the corner of Fifth Avenue and Church Street actually is the third space in the church’s
history after the first two buildings were lost to fires. Built in 1851 in an Egyptian
Revival style with two bell towers, the current church was the largest building for
decades on Nashville’s landscape (see figures 2.1-3). A historic landmark, it remains the
only Presbyterian church in the downtown area.

2 Ibid, 56, 60.
3 J. Ross Cheshire, A History of the Beginning and Early Days of The Downtown Presbyterian Church of Nashville, Tennessee (Nashville: J.R. Cheshire, 1992), 89. Cheshire was one of the founding members of DPC.
4 Cheshire, A History, 1, 4, 75.
Figure 2.1. DPC on 5th and Church

Figure 2.2. Another view of DPC
The evolution of the different names of the church—“Old First” then “First” and now “Downtown Presbyterian”—tells a story of a mid-twentieth century church split that is crucial to the church’s identity formation and its place as an urban church in Nashville; this story then impacts the formation of the three homeless social worlds situated at DPC today. The primary cause of this schism was mid-twentieth century suburbanization. Originally centered in a fashionable residential area, First Church was no longer surrounded by upper class homes by the period of 1910-1920 when families had moved farther out in a first suburban wave to new neighborhoods such as Edgefield across the river or to the west in Richland-West End, Belmont, and Belle Meade. Despite this early suburban movement, First’s records show that it remained affluent and growing and was
the largest church in the Southern General Assembly with over 1500 members. Still, losing its place among wealthy residential homes must have caused some concern, as evidenced by Rev. James Vance’s Centennial sermon in 1915 that addresses the issue of the church’s identity in a changing downtown setting:

We are a downtown church. Some regard this as a handicap. I look upon it as an asset. These smoke-begrimed towers look down on the busy street thronged with people and seem to say, ‘Remember God!’ The great bell in the tower peals out its summons above all the noises of the city, reminding men of the other world. Give me a church where life is densest, and human need is greatest—not a church in some sequestered sylvan retreat, not a temple in some lonely solitude far removed from the walks of life and attended only by the children of privilege and leisure, but give me a church whose doorstep is on the pavement, against whose walls beat and lap the tides of labor, whose hymns mingle with the rattle of cars and the groans of traffic, whose seats are within easy reach of men falling under heavy burdens, and whose altars are hallowed by the publician’s prayer. God grant that this old church on the busiest corner of the town may be increasingly this kind of church! (my italics)

It is as if Vance senses the changes afoot and already sees ahead to a time when more of his congregation will flee to the suburbs, so he is making a case now to his congregation for accepting First’s identity as a downtown church. His appeal is based on two arguments. One, the good of an urban church, says Vance, is providing a material presence—in the sound of the tower bells and hymn singing—that calls people to God and reminds people amidst city noise of God’s “other” transcendent world. Two—and this is important for the context of the suburban flight—a downtown church, says Vance,

5 Damaris Witherspoon Steele, First Church: A History of Nashville First Presbyterian Church Vol 2: 1900-1954 (White Bluff: RedLine Books, 2004), 55-56. Baptized at First in 1920, Witherspoon Steele was a life long member of First and then a founder of DPC. She was the first woman elder in the church’s 200-year history.

6 This part of his sermon became a kind of rallying cry during the vote on the church split, in The Banner opinion-editorial pieces calling to save the church building, and by the smaller Downtown Presbyterian congregation as they began anew. Witherspoon Steele, First Church: A History, 36.
should not be attended only by “the children of privilege and leisure.” Instead of welcoming just the families of privilege, Vance is calling on First to open its seats to those “falling under heavy burdens.” Although Vance does not spell out what those burdens are in 1915, almost one hundred years later, his exhortation can resonate today as DPC is a place where street persons momentarily lay down or may find ways through its homeless social worlds to break free from the burdens that come with homelessness.

Unlike Vance who embraced First’s urban location and the call to welcome those different from most of its members, his successor, Rev. Walter Courtenay, told the church that its location was a problem and did not favor growth of family memberships. Ridley Wills, one of the three surviving charter members of Downtown Presbyterian, recalls Courtenay’s position: “He never really liked being downtown. He thought downtown was dirty. Nashville was burning soft coal at the time and there was grime on our building. And, of course, parking was becoming a problem. He thought he’d have trouble competing with other Presbyterian churches.” Courtenay’s sermons and Session minutes from the 1940’s are revealing in his repeated appeals for moving First to the suburbs and his logic for relocation. Using gas rationing during World War II as a primary reason, his suggestion to relocate appealed to his members on the basis of their sense of patriotism and sacrifice. He also appealed to their sense of pride and competition as he preached that a move would enable them to maintain their place as the largest Presbyterian church and so “effectively compete with other churches.”7 Finally, he made his case that moving away from downtown would be in line with God’s plan in

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7 Witherspoon Steele, *First Church: A History*, 145, 149.
which “God would be able to use us for greater purposes.”8 This only underscored his authority to discern God’s intentions for First Church.

Courtenay’s argument found a following and by 1949, First entered into an agreement with the Cheek family to use their Oak Hill property and horse land with its manse further out on Tyne and Franklin Road as a weekday Sunday School and summer camp, Sunday school youth meeting place, and Sunday evening worship. It was an immediate success. Over two hundred persons were regularly attending in a chapel of only 120 seats. In four years from 1949-53, Sunday School children attendance had increased from 67 to 214, and Courtenay added an early Sunday worship service at Oak Hill as well as the one downtown. More members began choosing Oak Hill for their weddings and funerals. Soon, Courtenay and a group of members were pressing the church to buy this property because they now had the advantage of a second location with an added “suburban place of loveliness,” a place which would only increase doing “greater and more permanent work for God and the Kingdom.”9

How Courtenay and some of the First congregants understand God’s greater purposes and work for God’s Kingdom coincides with and is shaped by the mid-twentieth century national phenomenon of suburbanization. Suburbanization was a major social reality in the institutional life of mainline Protestants from the 1940’s and onward.10 For

8 Ibid.
9 Witherspoon Steele, 172.
10 James Hudnut-Beumler’s book Looking for God closely examines this phenomenon and sociologists from this time period who wrote about the integrity of religion practices in suburban churches and identity in American culture. James Hudnut-Beumler, Looking
all the good of increased church memberships particularly among young families, one of the problems of American suburbia was its view of church as a social convenience and escape from social and political struggles. In *Looking for God in the Suburbs*, American Christianity historian Hudnut-Beumler writes that the “suburbs resulted in homogenous communities…the typical suburban church had exactly what most prosperous members were looking for in a religious home—people exactly like themselves.”

One sociologist at the time, Gibson Winter, gave a scathing critique of the suburban church in *The Suburban Captivity of the Churches* (1961). Winter argued that “suburban dominance” was a national tragedy that bespoke of God’s judgment: “for our trespasses and complacency we have been delivered to Babylon.” Winter recognized a pattern occurring across North America with city growth: as one moved out from a city’s center, one found “rings of decreasing population density” and “progressively more expensive housing, more education, and higher incomes” but moving to the city center, one found residents with fewer skills, less money, and poorer dwellings. He argued that this pattern revealed how “the spatial distances between people mirror” economic, social, and racial distances. Thus, Winter saw the city as essential to an American church’s identity and pronounced the city the primary site of mission and the final test of a

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14 Ibid.
church’s inclusivity because a city church could challenge or accept “the vicious cycle of demolition-redevelopment-and spreading blight” of a city’s center.15 When First Church chose to rent and eventually relocate to Oak Hill, they were doing what Winter saw many Protestant churches do—“upgrading”—always seeking out better locations and membership markets with pools of people associated by likeness in race and class.16 The goal of “upgrading” spelled out social success but also a failure of faithfulness since the church, as Winter argues, “witness[es] to none.”17

In 1954, First’s congregation voted two thirds to one third for relocating its entire church to Oak Hill. The church split primarily down lines of gender and age into two congregations. With the split, First’s memberships dropped from over 1000 to a little over 300. Looking at the list of members who remained, most of the names are of women. Ridley Wills explains, “Mostly it was widowed grandmothers who did not want to move. My grandma stayed. She grew up on Vine Street, now Seventh Avenue, walking distance from the church. She was not going to move. Very few whole families stayed. Mostly grandparents stayed while their children and grandchildren moved.” Those who moved to Oak Hill took not only First members with younger families but also lay claim to the original church’s history: they took the First Church name, the traditional sketch of the Egyptian Revival building at Fifth and Church for its own weekly bulletins, and even chiseled out the cornerstone and memorial plaques for their new place. One member who remained downtown expressed her disappointment in

15 Winter, Suburban Captivity, 9.
16 Winter, Suburban Captivity, 42.
17 Winter, Suburban Captivity, 35.
losing these identity markers: “Nothing was said about painting out the history.”18 In taking these markers to their relocation, the new First intended to legitimate its being “real” “Old First.” The contested name, First Presbyterian, has continued until recently to be a point of tension. A former minister of Downtown Presbyterian recalls how even in 2005, “many members of our church refused to refer to First Pres as First Pres, preferring to call it Oak Hill. The few folks who remained after the split were so embittered that I don’t think they wanted any reminders.”

But this was not the end of DPC’s struggle. If city development and suburbanization had contributed to the “lash-up” and displacement of the homeless, it was now threatening to displace this newly assembled DPC congregation. The now smaller church was in danger of losing its downtown location and had to figure out how it could purchase its own building and property from First at Oak Hill. In 1955 First’s Session agreed to sell the downtown church building and property to the minority group for $550,000, but when they could not afford that price, the Session planned to sell to a parking garage company. As those plans solidified, First refused the minority group use of the downtown building, so a neighboring church, McKendree Methodist, opened their space to them for meetings and worship. With the real possibility of losing the church building to a parking garage, suddenly the issue became one of concern for the entire city.

Opinion editorials written by members and concerned citizens poured into The Banner as well as the National Trust for Historic Preservation. These pieces along with

speeches given at fundraising meetings offer different accounts for why the church was worth saving. Vanderbilt professors of Fine Arts wrote of its unique Egyptian Revival style. Women wrote in that they were moved by the church’s founders being mostly female and wanted it rescue for that reason. Others wanted to save it because of significant local and national events that it witnessed from state governor inaugurations, and the War of 1812 victory celebration with Andrew Jackson to the use of Old First as a hospital for Union soldiers and later in WW I and II as a service men’s lounge.¹⁹

Besides historical and architectural reasons, religion motivated people to speak out for preserving the church building. The church printed fliers with a full page picture (that was later reprinted in *The Banner* as a full page advertisement) in which a man holds his hat and looks on with awe at the larger-than-life church towering over a throng of people. Behind the church are the words, “Abiding Faith,” lighting up the sky and shining down upon the church and people.²⁰ (See fig 2.4) What a presence of “abiding faith” meant varied. Some simply wanted Nashville’s downtown landscape to have old churches because they considered Nashville “the number one church town in America”²¹ and compared the church’s presence in Nashville to that of Trinity Church in New York.

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²¹ This was spoken by Dr. Crabb at a fundraising meeting to save the church. Cheshire, *A History*, 75.
Ridley Wills’ father, Jesse Wills, was an elder for the church who echoed his former pastor Vance (and foretold of his own grandson’s work at The Contributor) and said that residing downtown meant First Church could “best serve the cause of the Lord in Nashville” by “serving a downtown center for social work and evangelical work.”22 A concerned citizen wrote a letter to the National Trust for Historic Preservation and advocated saving the church for a whole other religious reason—because “a city church…is of the greatest spiritual value to a city as offering a place of quiet for worship.

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22 Witherspoon Steele, First Church, 140-1.
for people in the noon hour, before work or after work, or for exhausted shoppers." In other words, an urban church’s “spiritual value” lies in providing a sanctuary of momentary peace for workers and consumers—for those persons contributing to society who have jobs and can afford to spend money and time in downtown businesses. From this viewpoint, those who are “exhausted” from trying to survive without a home or job—arguably, a job in and of itself, as a few homeless persons have remarked—and are walking on those same noisy streets go unseen. The downtown church is not so much a refuge for the poor of downtown but one for shoppers. It seems that the “spiritual” worth of the presence of a church abiding in the midst of a city’s center was a contested one.

However this landmark was seen as worth saving—spiritual, historical, architectural, or a combination—the support that galvanized around saving the building succeeded. By the summer of 1955, Downtown Presbyterian had raised $550,000 to buy the property and had its official charter. This formational event of Downtown Presbyterian—the split within the Old First Church, the relocation of First to the suburbs, and the near loss and rescue of its downtown location to charter its old but new church community—soon was interpreted by this small congregation through the gospel story of Jesus’ own death and resurrection that gave them hope: “Instead of Gethsemane, Agony, Resurrection, the story of Downtown Church follows the sequence of Agony, Resurrection, Gethsemane” because “its death and rebirth are already past history.” They came out on the other side of this trial with new life and a belief that they may, as

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24 Cheshire, A History, 89.
DPC founder James Pilkerton put it, “not be a booming church but [they were] a real church.”25 For the founding members of DPC, what made them “real” as a church was going through their trials of death and rebirth with an unwavering commitment to their urban place. In an interview, DPC founder Ridley Wills reflected on how he understood the new church’s identity and place:

We thought the Presbyterians should have a church in the heart of the city. That is why we stayed. We’d be damned if they were going to turn our church into a parking lot. I just think **all churches** need to have a church in the heart of the city where life isn’t easy. It can be a beacon. It’s not like our church is in the middle of urban poverty, but the poor can and do find us. We’re just used to it, that’s why we’re there. It’s a part of who we became and who we are now. We were an entirely different church before the split.

The formational event of DPC shows that one of the material conditions for living that shapes our faith commitments and the human spirit is residential patterns. First’s identity as a downtown church was pushed to its limits with suburbanization and reached a breaking point when the pastor and the majority of its members chose to relocate to a suburban space under the auspices of working to fulfill God’s greater purposes that they did not think could be met as well in its downtown location. The opposing responses within First’s congregation to the Oak Hill property—“suburban place of loveliness” versus “country club”26—reveal something about incorporative traditioning (Connerton 1989) at work. In the midst of the schism, when Rev. Courtenay chastised his congregation members for being too in love with their historic building, he made a telling

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26 Witherspoon Steele, *First Church*, 174.
statement: “This building does not house our traditions, our people do, and wherever the people are, there are the traditions of old First Church.”

Courtenay is right, but not necessarily in the way he meant. People of faith do embody or carry a church’s traditions, but not just the inscribed traditions of doctrinal and scriptural beliefs. When the majority of the church moved, their flight to the suburbs revealed incorporative traditions including a posture of fear of those different in terms of class and race—in other words, “matter out of place” that they could not expunge or ignore but they could flee by extracting themselves from downtown Nashville (that, by the 1950s was beginning to lose its high end retail and wealthy white family homes) and going to a place where people looked like themselves. While members of the new and “real” First Presbyterian Church account for this split in terms of necessary church growth for families and youth, members of DPC account for this split in terms of a white flight to the suburbs that nearly destroyed them and turned their historical building into a parking garage. The minority group who remained downtown to form DPC saw themselves as refusing to participate in the suburban flight. As DPC founding member Pilkerton said, DPC saw their own story in light of Jesus’s life. They thought they had lived through the agony (the schism), the resurrection (DPC’s new life) and then Gethsemane (the time of uncertainty in not knowing if DPC’s cup of suffering would pass). With Gethsamene having passed, their commitment to staying downtown paved the way years later for the ministries with Nashville’s homeless—the Wednesday

27 My italics. Witherspoon Steele, First Church, 149.
worship service, the Living Room, and the Contributor—to emerge and potentially offer the homeless places where they could appear as more than transgressive strangers.

That said, for some, staying at DPC during the schism was not necessarily first and foremost to champion work with the poor on Nashville’s downtown streets but to preserve a historic building and maintain some prestige that may have left with the members relocating to Oak Hill. As Linda White, DPC’s associate pastor (2003-07) describes the church: “DPC in my estimation was made up of two kinds of people: people who where there because of the location and wanted to help the homeless and people who wanted to preserve the history of the building. It was a challenge to preserve that gap.” If DPC insisted on seeing itself as the “real” First, some who remained did see the “realness” of their church largely in preserving their historic building. For other members, like Jesse and Ridley Wills, what made them “real” was saying no to the “country club” suburban church with its limitations of homogeneity and saying yes to the Christian practices that an urban place asked of them: to give “refuge to the poor” and service to transients as well as “the lonely, the downhearted, to stranger without our gates.”

These understandings of the ecclesial “realness” or what I see as the *faithfulness* of Downtown Presbyterian will continue to overlap and at times come into conflict in the form of incorporative tradition particularly as the three ministries for the homeless at the church. It is to their own formational events, stories, and practices and the tests of them that I now look. If, as Hudnut-Beumler points out, the suburban

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neighborhood is only a location and “not a true community,”\(^{29}\) will those who rejected
the Oak Hill site to form a new downtown church be able to live out such a “true
community” when tested? Will its people give the transient poor a place to encounter
God and be seen beyond stigmas that come with extreme poverty? Will DPC’s social
worlds that minister to the homeless be able to do that as well?

*The Homeless Social World of Wednesday Worship and Lunch*

One test of DPC’s identity as a real or faithful downtown church that welcomes
the needy came in the early 1980’s. This test was also a formational event of the
Wednesday worship and lunch, one of the three social worlds for the homeless situated at
the church. The DPC Wednesday worship and lunch originally began in the 1940’s
under Rev. Courtenay who wanted to provide a time for downtown businessmen church
members to gather mid-week for prayer and fellowship. About forty years later, under
the leadership of Pastor Emeritus Pat McGeachy, the Wednesday service and lunch
transformed into a place for Nashville’s homeless. In an interview, McGeachy was
emphatic that he “couldn’t take credit” for the emergence of this ministry because “It just
happened. It happened to us rather than our deciding to go and do this. You may be
hearing me and thinking, it sounds like he didn’t have a plan and you know, I didn’t. I
just loved.” He recounted how he saw it come into being:

One of the things I took over when I had come earlier was a businessman’s lunch— it was a
really nice lunch—and a bible study and thirty minute worship service. It had been
happening for decades. By the time I was there, not all those coming were members of
the church. It was never more than thirty or forty. It went from being white collar to

\(^{29}\) Hudnut-Beumler, 135.
blue collar to no collar. One day a couple of homeless men showed up and, as we
Christians know what to do, we took them in.

At first, when the numbers of homeless men were few and the business men were the
majority, McGeachy says that they made room and shared the space with the homeless:
“For a while, people would really sit down with them and discuss real things and treat
them like human beings. Because of where the church is, we were so lucky. It allowed
for this thing to happen there.”

McGeachy saw this unintentional change as an invitation to practice what he
called “gospel table manners.” He was eager to improvise on the Wednesday service and
lunch tradition he inherited partly because of how he understood his calling and his role
at DPC. McGeachy started at DPC as the associate pastor of Inner City Ministries (that
he shared with Father Strobel) and quickly became the head pastor. He understood his
vocation as a call to be among the poor in a smaller urban congregation which was his
main reason for taking the pastor position at DPC: “I spent all this time wiping suburban
noses and was finally with a smaller, urban congregation. I wasn’t a sociologist or a
change agent. But I was hired by the Presbytery to be first and foremost an urban
minister to the city of Nashville. They wanted a person of the Spirit to deal with urban
problems.”

McGeachy’s hope for improvising on this tradition to include the homeless found
inspiration from his experiences in urban ministry which he used to read the gospels; he
also was motivated by figures in the larger church tradition and modern theology.
McGeachy drew on the latter to encourage the now minority of Wednesday domesticated
regulars to continue coming along with the greater number of homeless participants:

I wanted to have everyone share in worship and then sit at the table because that is what
we see Jesus doing in the gospels. What Saint Francis said, ‘preach the gospel at all times
and if needed use words.’ This is the gospel—feeding people. The Lord laid on me a
burden to feed hungry people. Augustine heard someone say ‘Take up and read.’ I heard
someone say, ‘Take up and feed.’ But not just feed them. I had read Henri Nouwen’s
Life of the Beloved and talked with them [the businessmen] about the four verbs of the
Eucharist—we’re taken, blessed, broken and then we are supposed to give and be given.
This is church. It’s what Ed Farley calls the ‘interhuman’30 or Martin Buber the ‘I-thou.’31 A community of belonging.”

McGeachy, sounding similar to Father Strobel who I discussed in Chapter 1,
looks for his vision of church in the movements of the Eucharist as described by Catholic
priest and writer of the spiritual life, Henri Nouwen.32 McGeachy also credits the
theologies of Farley and Buber as formative not just for his own understanding of church
as a “community of belonging” but also for his vision of the mid-week service and lunch
as it began to take shape into a ministry for what he hoped would not be to but with the
homeless. Farley’s Good and Evil (1990) identifies the interhuman as an essential part of
a theology on the human condition. It is where we are vulnerable as humans to evil as
well as to redemption’s transformation. According to Farley, the interhuman is a sphere

32 McGeachy chose a book that I have found most formative for my own faith and
teaching. Life of the Beloved, a personally and simply written book, was originally meant
for Nouwen’s friend, a secular Jew who wanted something to help him, a non-religious
person understand the spiritual life. Nouwen’s basic premise is that we humans long to be
called Beloved and to know, as Jesus experienced in his baptism, we are accepted and
loved; it is our “birthright” that no one should be denied. We can come to this
Belovedness and support others to do so as well, in living out the Eucharistic movements,
taken, blessed, broken, given. Henri Nouwen, Life of the Beloved, (New York: Crossroad
of human reality or the Between in which we have personal, face-to-face relations. The interhuman is comprised of three elements, alterity (the other’s irreducibility), interpersonal (the concrete experiences of the other as other), and intersubjectivity (the givenness of the other). For McGeachy’s point, the interhuman’s second element of interpersonal is significant. He feels that church happens in the concrete acts of worship and table fellowship when the other of the homeless is invited to participate. There is an opportunity for what Farley calls the “actual meeting and dialogue” as well as empathy.33

The interpersonal is also what Buber deals with in *I and Thou* (1923) in which Buber describes the movement from the position of objective observer (“I-It”) to active and empathetic participant (“I-Thou”), a movement that happens when a person engages the other in an encounter made absolute by love. Buber argues that the transformation from the encounter is one of divine revelation and salvation where I can say “Thou” to the other and the world and be enabled to build genuine community. This, then, is what McGeachy means by a “community of belonging” where he hopes the space of DPC’s midweek chapel service and fellowship would be inhabited by both homed and homeless persons (see figure 2.5).

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33 Farley, *Good and Evil*, 32.
The formative stories and symbols for McGeachy in this changing Wednesday worship and lunch then—Jesus’s feedings and the Lord’s Supper as told by Nouwen and the face-to-face interactions as described by Farley and Buber—he hoped would also capture the imaginations of the businessmen and sustain their participation.

Farley’s category of intersubjectivity is crucial to recognizing the ways we become habituated into feeling threatened by the bodies of homeless strangers. Farley points out that the interhuman is both a given and a task; as a task, it is something we can either want or we can forget and even work to forget with suppression. While McGeachy encouraged his midweek non-homeless congregants to remember the interhuman by continuing to attend the worship service and lunch with the homeless, they opted to abandon it. As the numbers of the homeless grew—“as two became four became eight
became two hundred”—the purpose and population of this gathering began to change for the businessmen who felt uncomfortable with the numerical imbalance and began to see this event and space no longer as theirs. They turned it over completely to the homeless. In a conversation I had with one active DPC congregant who has been a member for decades and worked downtown, I asked if he ever has attended the midweek service and lunch. His look seemed quizzical and he asked, “But why would I? It is strictly homeless.”

McGeachy recalled how some who had been attending expressed discomfort to him with the change in the space on a sensory level: “Some complained to me that it smelled like a latrine and a brewery—and it did—and soon the businessmen stopped coming to lunch.” When I first met DPC’s current minister Ken Locke, he said, tongue-in-cheek, “Boy, I wish middle class manners were a prerequisite for salvation.” Linda White, former associate minister of DPC, preached at the homeless midweek service and said of it and the lunch, “A few of our members who are businessmen downtown, they came every so often but they were unhappy with how it smelled and looked and came really out of a sense of duty.” The discomfort with smells and sights, the lack of “middle class” sensibilities—these largely caused the downtown businessmen to abandon what Farley calls the interpersonal and lose an opportunity to create McGeachy’s ecclesial vision, “a community of belonging” with the homeless.

Sociologist Paul Connerton’s work on incorporative practices and social memory is helpful in understanding what is happening here in the formation of the Wednesday worship and lunch as a “strictly” homeless gathering and what the above former DPC
pastors observed. In *How Society Remembers*, Connerton defines incorporative traditions as bodily practices. They are “messages that a sender or senders impart by means of their own current bodily activity, the transmission occurring only during the time that their bodies are present to sustain that particular activity.” (Connerton 1989, 72). A handshake, a smile, “sitting like a man,” sitting “correctly”—these are incorporative practices that are culturally specific, reveal power and rank, and can become so automatic we do not consciously think about doing them (72-73). Connerton stresses the hidden role of desire in incorporative practices that exert a hold over us and “impel us toward certain courses of action” (93). Embodied practices as habitual and affective dispositions are not simply “skills waiting to be called into action on the appropriate occasion” because, as Connerton notes, “habits entail an inherent tendency to act a certain way ...and to act in ways that belie or override our conscious decisions and formal resolutions.” Such “formal resolutions” can include religious belief commitments, or what Connerton calls inscribed practices based on text and writing.

DPC came into being in downtown Nashville in large part to heed a call to address the needs of the city, including the needs of the transient poor. For some founders, their foundational story of living through Jesus’ death and rebirth first meant, in part, sharing their new life with the poor. The Christian businessmen attending the

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34 Connerton’s work, *How Society Remembers*, on social memory and the overlooked importance of incorporative practices can illumine these processes at work in the formation of the homeless Wednesday worship and lunch that tested the church’s identity as a welcoming downtown ecclesial presence for the urban poor. I will return to this issue in greater detail with the DPC homeless social worlds. Paul Connerton, *How Society Remembers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

35 Ibid.
midweek worship and fellowship, I imagine, would certainly say that they are committed
to “formal resolutions” of Christian beliefs and would have no problem remembering and
believing in the Jesus of scripture that Rev. McGeachy talked about with them—the Son
of God who both feeds and abides among those in need. However, their desire to own
the church space and keep that space largely free of the smells and sights of homelessness
while they are in it, this is what supersedes and suppresses their formal Christian beliefs
(and worship practices) that articulate in written form (be it creed, hymn, biblical text, or
prayer) a belief in a God who cares for and is found among the poor. That they even state
their reasons aloud to Pastors McGeachy and White does not mean that they see this
disconnect; rather, they seem oblivious to their unconscious habituations to what their
bodies are like in church and what their church space is like with them in it. These are
trumping their faith commitments. Their leaving the midweek worship and fellowship
once the numbers shifted in favor of the homeless shows a fear of their being near the
homeless other and what that proximity could do to them—or ask of them.

The original participants of DPC’s midweek service and fellowship were working
out their own culturally habituated tradition of how white mainline Protestants do church.
In her recent theology of feeling and embodiment, Marcia Mount Shoop has critiqued
mainline white Protestant churches for their preference for “a decent, orderly, even
mannerly way of being church” that comes from “a long tradition of polished
behavior.”

Shoop connects this bodily “dis-ease” in church with an American heritage

36 She points out that today’s “dis-ease” with the body (that of mainline white Protestants
as well as bodies of color that are more expressive and emotive in other worship
that has bequeathed to white mainline Protestants a desire for civilizing primitive others who do not follow their unspoken expectations of church behavior including physical control. When the homeless outnumbered the downtown businessmen and owned the church space in terms of smell, sight, and less controlled bodily postures, the downtown businessmen found it offensive to their own more civilized way of doing church. To be fair, some may have had no model and no experiential knowledge to draw on to know that homeless bodies would not bring them disease or harm. Others perhaps simply could not tolerate encounters with homeless strangers that provoked anxiety or ambiguity. Their “dis-ease” with the sights and smells of the extreme poor was not to be unlearned. Their discomfort with the ways the extreme poor might inhabit the church pews and Fellowship Hall dining tables and not follow their expected rules of etiquette and conversation had provoked in them a visceral response of fear and avoidance of the homeless strangers who do not look, smell or act “like us” in “our” body of Christ.37

DPC did open its doors and offered the homeless a space, however in a different way than Pastor McGeachy imagined—one that accommodated the classed bodily habituations of its members. In a word, their care for the homeless in this ministry has been strictly one of service and “working for” the poor rather than “being with” the

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37 Educator Ruby Payne calls these conversational and etiquette rules the “hidden rules” that are at work in and differ across class lines. I will return to this in Chapter 4 with my analysis of DPC’s Wednesday worship for the homeless. Ruby Payne, A Framework for Understanding Poverty (Highlands: aha! Process Press, 1996).
poor\textsuperscript{38} where the homeless have not been given a real “place to appear.”\textsuperscript{39} Essentially, the meal part of the Wednesday worship time was transformed into a soup kitchen by contemporary terms.\textsuperscript{40} When seen in its larger North American context, DPC’s response of charity to the homeless in the form of a soup kitchen is fairly typical.\textsuperscript{41} While a soup kitchen allows a church to respond directly to the homeless in a non-bureaucratic, concrete way, it does not address larger underlying issues of social inequalities nor does it offer homed persons the opportunity to be with the homeless in ways beyond and so see the full humanity of the homeless.

\textsuperscript{38} Sam Wells identifies three responses to poverty as working for, working with, and being with. He describes the response of being with the poor as being willing to set “aside your plans and strategies for change and simply feeling with disadvantaged people the pain of their situation… it means experiencing in your own body some of the fragility of relationships, self-esteem and general well-being that are at the heart of poverty.” He defends being with the poor as the most faithful Christian response that imitates God and the life of Jesus in practices such as embodied presence. Sam Wells, \textit{Living Without Enemies: Being Present in the Midst of Violence}, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 37, 65-73.

\textsuperscript{39} McClintock Fukerson, \textit{Places of Redemption}, 21.

\textsuperscript{40} DPC’s meal fits a contemporary definition of a soup kitchen as given by Harvard University School of Public Health: Soup kitchens are “places where a meal, usually lunch or dinner, is served on a regular basis, daily or weekly. Kitchens are usually located in churches…They are staffed by volunteers who plan, prepare, and serve a fill meal at little or no cost to as many as several hundred people. Meals range from soup or a sandwich and beverage to a full course hot dinner.” Physicians Task Force on Hunger, \textit{American Hunger Crisis} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

\textsuperscript{41} Irene Glasser, \textit{More than Bread: Ethnography of a Soup Kitchen} (Tuscaloosa, University of Alabama Press), 1988. 17. Sociologist Glasser goes into the historical background of soup kitchens in her ethnography. Common in the 1930s for feeding the unemployed, soup kitchens decreased after the Great Depression but resurfaced again in the 1980s because of four major developments that have impacted poverty and society’s responses to it: chronic unemployment and the development of an underclass, the deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill, the wane of government “safety net” programs, and an increasing awareness of the homeless.
All three DPC ministers said that they did “everything they could think of to get the congregation to come to the Wednesday events for the homeless” but congregation members would only come if they could serve. Rev. White recalls, “they were the kind of congregation that liked to help and not mingle. They seemed to feel more comfortable serving. A lot of times our congregation didn’t serve the lunch but when they did, they said to me, ‘This is what we do. Aren’t we wonderful?’” The congregants Rev White describes seem enthusiastic to embody charity but the charity of a soup kitchen implies and fosters an inequality between the giver and receiver rather than a mutuality that a meal shared among homed and homeless persons might find.

Rather than continuing to participate in the service and share lunch with the homeless and so cultivating holy practices such as compassion and adventure (Shoop 2010, 143-144), the original non-homeless participants cultivated unholy dispositions of aversion and avoidance of the homeless that obscured rather than welcomed the sacred. In fact, today, while DPC pays for and has their cooking staff prepare most meals, the servers more often than not are outsourced and come from suburban churches, like First Presbyterian. Of course, from a practical standpoint, bringing in outside volunteer help for a weekly meal is sensible, but the regular reliance on more volunteers outside of the congregation rather than from within may be telling. The formation of DPC’s Wednesday worship and lunch for the homeless challenged the church’s own formative event and story of its downtown identity as a sanctuary for the urban poor. The formative events and stories of two other homeless social worlds inhabiting DPC will continue to fill out the picture of how this church works out being a faithful place.
Igniting Fighting Spirits: The Living Room

To look for the Living Room homeless support group’s founding symbol, one can start with its name for a space in a home given over to hospitality and conversation. Currently, it has six leaders: one of the founders, Don Beisswenger and his wife, Judy; Doris Farley, a retired social worker; Samantha Williams, a recently graduated MDiv student; and two formerly homeless persons and Living Room participants, John Zicker and Madge Johnson. Weekly meetings are held in one of DPC’s basement parlors. With couches and upholstered chairs, a rug, a few marble top and wooden tables and a high ceiling fan, the space, indeed, has a “living room” feel to it—one where you’d settle in for a long talk, or as one homeless participant says, “for a good listen.” (see figure 2.6) Each Wednesday after the meal in DPC’s Fellowship Hall, this support group for the homeless meets from 1-2 pm.

A good listen” gets at the story of the Living Room’s formative event and one of the primary practices of this “being with” (Wells 2011) ministry. In 1995, Don Beisswenger, a Presbyterian pastor, social activist, and retired divinity school professor
was standing at the door to greet the homeless as they entered DPC for the Wednesday lunch. He began talking with Karl Smithson, a now deceased homeless man who, as Don remembers, suffered from mental illness but was bright and had deep compassion for the homeless. Karl’s advocating for the homeless of Nashville led him to run for governor and mayor. Don remembers their conversation at the church door:

The idea for the Living Room really began with what Karl said to me, ‘It troubles me that every place I go, no one ever asks me anything. They just tell me what to do. No one tries to understand me at all. That troubles me and I’d like a place to do that. I go to the doctor and he tells me to take these pills, or this and that.’ And I thought what Karl said seems accurate. So, we developed an idea of a place where the homeless could listen to each other and ‘homies’ could gather, too. They had no one to talk with and we take that for granted—it’s how I’ve had a lot of my personal growth, out of conversations.

Karl wanted to start this group out of his own experiences as a homeless and mentally ill person who did not have a place where his voice could be heard and understood. In a short piece entitled, “My Faith,” Karl wrote about how he envisioned the Living Room’s purpose of “igniting spirits” that won’t give up in the face of adversity:

The solution for people with major problems in crisis is not more programs, but personal relationships among people who have the courage to care; who open their hearts to the suffering of others and respond to that pain by sharing it and taking concrete action to get rid of it. The primary purpose of empowering the down and out is not to give them a home or food or clothes. To set people on fire and ignite their Spirit—to give them back their fighting spirit…our most prized possession is our fighting Spirit.42

Karl helped to found the Living Room as an expression of his faith in hopes that it would be a community where people form connections that would allow them to risk opening up to others. Through such risks and empathetic listening, homeless persons then would be

42 Karl Smithson entitled this piece “My Faith” and read it at the Living Room occasionally. Don shared this with me from his personal library.
empowered to act on their “fighting Spirit.” Intentional or not, his image of setting people on fire invokes the early Acts story of Pentecost (Acts 2.1-12) and may offer another founding story and symbol for the Living Room from scripture. The Living Room is where the homeless and “homies” come together in one place, where God’s Spirit also comes and empowers them to communicate and listen across differences. As the Spirit was given to Jesus and then his apostles to empower them to heed a call to preach and live into the Kingdom of God, so too, the Spirit, for Karl, seems to be a gift to the Living Room that empowers the homeless to stay hopeful and resilient in the face of adversity.

The other Living Room founder, Don, was motivated by different experiences and biblical narratives as well as theologians who shaped his understanding of the human condition and the nature of God. Don pointed to Paul’s letter to the Romans for one of his guiding principles in why he helped to begin the Living Room.

I’ve found Romans 3.23 to be personally true: ‘for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God’—to recognize that’s who I am—a son of a bitch like everyone else…I’m not someone perfect and telling others how to be. Being present and listening to and helping one another while accepting the differences—and recognizing your own vulnerability is important for me. ‘A Christian is one son of a bitch helping another son of a bitch out of the ditch,’ that’s what Will Campbell said. There is a revelatory power of God to reach all in the world. All people are children of God. We need to learn to see that. In that room, we are seeing that.

Romans 3.23 reminds Don of his shared humanity that is vulnerable in its very ambiguity of being both “a son of a bitch” and a child of God. He reads Romans as a call to accept this and see others as God’s children, and, I would add, even those whom we don’t want to see as such, due in part to our own habituated fears of them that reveals fears of,
perhaps even disgust with, our own selves. For Don, the Living Room, with practices of care in presence and listening, offers a place to learn to re-see ourselves and others as sharing a common humanity and as Beloved by God.

A second scripture text also provided Don with a guiding principle in forming the Living Room’s ministry. When I asked Don why he formed and continued participating in the Living Room, he simply pointed to a modern wooden sculpture—an abstract form of a person crying out with raised hands. He said, Isaiah 58—that’s Isaiah, you know. As Isaiah says, we need to hear the cry of people in order to understand God. That’s where God comes in special ways—where we experience God’s love and justice. Isaiah 58 is a key scripture for me because all the things you do, the fasting and feasting, the religious stuff, well, you really have got to do justice and be attentive to God’s presence in that. It’s in those moments where God comes.

Don talks about the Living Room an experience of God because, as Isaiah 58 prophecies, God is found among the exiled: “I’m convinced God is where people are vulnerable. If you want to know where God is, you must be in vulnerability.” Thus, Don envisions the Living Room providing a place where he can reflect on God’s presence among the homeless and develop relationships in response.

The biblical texts of Isaiah and Romans in and of themselves alone have not inspired Don; life experiences and commitments where he learned to practice the presence of listening have brought these scriptures to life for him. They have then informed his readings of texts where he recognizes God’s revelation in scripture. When Don talks about realizing that an important part of God is found in listening to the cries of the poor, he points first to his time of living with the poor in Latin America and to
repeated extended stays at the Open Door in Atlanta. Both, he says, revealed God’s nature to him and took him back to Isaiah 58 to interpret it in light of this experience. As he talks about the impact of Romans 3.23 on his founding the Living Room, he says he’s learned to read it in light of his conversations with fellow activist and preacher, Will Campbell, as well as his first marriage, a lifetime of commitment he calls his “his most important experience” because in it he “learned more about presence in those fifty years, engaged in ups and downs—if we could accept the differences.” In short, it was not first and foremost a scripture passage that motivated Don to start the Living Room but a conversation at the church door where he experienced God’s presence in listening to a homeless man’s struggle. Like Rev. McGeachy who founded the Wednesday homeless worship and lunch, when Don talks about scripture that guided his work at the Living Room, his hermeneutic principle for those texts is rooted in life experiences where he has discovered aspects of the divine as well as the human condition.

Particular theologians such as Frederich Buechner and Paul Tillich and their emphasis on God’s revelation being found in community and life story have also informed Don in his desire to begin the Living Room. When I came to Don’s home, he greeted me with a book by Buechner, *Listening to Your Life*. He read me excerpts, all of which emphasized becoming more fully human and finding God through telling one’s life story and listening to the stories of others. Don remarked, “if you don’t listen, you’re

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43 Don went to Buechner’s now oft-quoted, “Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery it is. In the boredom and pain of it, no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it, because in the last analysis
just working on your own little world. And the relationship between God and humans is a relationship that requires listening.” He intends the Living Room to be a place for the homeless to experience God’s presence through the practice of discernment—of paying attention to where God, whom Don jokingly calls “the big ear,” might be in their own lives.

In addition to Buechner, Tillich was important to Don in how he understands the Living Room’s purpose as becoming a “New Creation”:

Tillich said, ‘Here and there in the world, now and then in ourselves, there is a New Creation.’ And this is the life process I see and that is happening at the Living Room—it keeps going on, learning to be human and relating to diversity. The goal here is to create community. At times it seems like it’s got dimensions of a larger family that bounce along together once in a while but it’s not very intense. I always thought of it more as a neighborhood where people can come and go and act and sometimes things work out.

The “New Creation” of the Living Room, for Don, is largely one of community that includes the homeless. Sustaining a community among the homeless who are struggling with a variety of issues from mental illness to substance abuse presents a real limitation of the Living Room’s work. The homeless co-founder, Karl is a case in point. Karl wanted a place to be heard and seen, but his own struggles with mental illness prevented him both from leading and consistently participating in the Living Room: “It was so ironic,” Don said, “He was in and out, he threw chairs sometimes. He really wanted it but he didn’t stay with it.”

all moments are key moments and life itself is grace.” Buechner, Listening to Your Life, (San Francisco: Harper Publishing, 1992), 2.
For others at the Living Room, an identifiable “New Creation” of their support group was an offshoot from it that worked for social change and had a voice in Nashville’s political discourse. The summer of 2002, a grassroots organization “with a strong spiritual foundation” grew out of Living Room meetings about the problems homeless persons were facing. Working out of the basement of DPC and then an office in the Arcade, the NHPP was made up primarily of Living Room members. They worked to stop laws in Nashville aimed at criminalizing the poor and provided educational workshops on homelessness for the police force, schools, and churches. They also held vigils and rallies that will play a part in the formation of *The Contributor*.

If the Wednesday worship and lunch group’s identity was limited by the incorporative practices of the original participants (Whose bodies do I feel comfortable eating and worshiping with in this church space?), the Living Room has not found bodily habituations to be a major impediment in offering the homeless a place to appear and be in community. As such issues have come up, for instance, homeless persons needing to sleep during a meeting or the disruption that crops up with intoxicated participants, they improvise. “Homies”—for the most part, the group leaders—sit alongside unwashed, undeodorized bodies and do not complain. Instead, the Living Room’s formational practices have been tested more by the kinds of sharing that are encouraged and discouraged as well as the understandings of God and God’s saving action in people’s lives.

Let me explain. While Don and Karl envisioned forming a place where homeless persons could find some sense of community and empowerment by voicing their concerns and sharing their stories, the addition of new Living Room leaders with own motivations and understandings of the Living Room’s purpose meant some change for the group’s tone and re-negotiating its identity. In an effort to share power and really live up to the founders’ shared vision of listening to the homeless, Don sought out group leaders among a few long-term Living Room participants who had experienced homelessness firsthand. John and Madge, two of the six current leaders are formerly homeless and, significantly, both have overcome issues of substance abuse and their ways of being in the Living Room and their spiritualities have been influenced by their time in AA and NA small groups. They bring to the Living Room “12 Step speak” and a kind of AA spirituality.

That they want to bring this to the Living Room makes sense in that both AA and the Living Room are part of a larger small group movement. The Living Room self-identifies as a support group where, as Linda White put it, “personal growth” emerges with talking, and it has been called a “self help” group by a couple of the leaders during meetings. If the larger context of the growth of soup kitchens in North American churches helps to understand the formation of the homeless Wednesday worship and lunch at DPC, then the small group and recovery “self help” movement more broadly place the Living Room. Sociologist Robert Wuthnow identifies the small group movement as a late 20th century phenomenon that began in response to a perceived breakdown in community. He puts small groups within a trajectory of American tradition
of voluntary associations, a populist mentality of individuals helping themselves, and a pragmatic approach of finding wisdom not in clergy or creeds but in life experience.⁴⁵

According to his extensive study done in the late 1990’s, over 40% of the American public from various segments of society became involved in some kind of small group out of a yearning for community and the sacred, and nearly two-thirds of small groups had some connection to a church or synagogue and had as a theme, the spiritual journey.⁴⁶

While John’s and Madge’s ability to reach out and relate to some homeless participants struggling with addictions has been perceived as helpful, some group visitors have found their use of AA language and 12 step emphases off-putting or irrelevant and have not returned. This plays out more in the group’s monthly day retreats to Penuel Ridge where John will begin the retreat by telling the Genesis 33 story of Jacob wrestling God at Penuel and move into his own conversion narrative: lost in drugs and drinking, he truly began to wrestle with God at his first Penuel Ridge retreat. He attributes Penuel Ridge and the Living Room with his triumph over substance abuse and his ascent out of homelessness. John asks the homeless participants to wrestle with God on their own retreat and by the end of the day, when they are in a circle, he invites them to share their struggles and what they are taking away as they leave. One Living Room participant,

⁴⁶ Ibid. Wuthnow argues that the small group movement changed American society in significant ways regarding how we understand community and the sacred or the spiritual. Because he does not take into account homeless small groups, I will point out the difference a homeless context makes in the next chapter with my analysis on the Living Room.
Kenny Bill comes regularly to the Living Room as well as to the retreats. Kenny Bill is a 54-year-old white man who first became homeless when his girlfriend lost their home and he got behind on his alimony and child support bills. Kenny Billy says that he does not feel like he has anything to say to the Penuel story at this point. He wishes the retreats would not assume he was a drunk in need of change and would focus less on Jacob’s story of wrestling with God, a story he’s heard now half a dozen times. He would like to hear more on the sufferings of Job, with whom he identifies.

Don worries about some homeless feeling they must share in a certain way or make their stories fit into a particular mold: “The Living Room is more AA right now and so the homeless who come aren’t really encouraged to articulate how they feel…You know, I mentored John in how to lead and listen, but children are like shooting an arrow into the sky and you don’t know where they are going to land.” Thus, along with the difficulty of building a cohesive community or neighborhood-feel among the homeless who struggle with mental illness and having sustained, trusting relationships in their transient lifestyle, the Living Room’s identity has also been stretched in its “being with” type of formational practices of presence and listening as new leaders bring commitments to their 12 Step program that change how participants can or cannot narrate their stories and respond to others.

The Contributor

The third social world for the homeless situated at DPC is a street paper organization. The North American street paper movement and its history of alternative publications helps to more broadly place the formation of The Contributor. The street
paper—a publication that addresses issues of poverty and is distributed by the homeless and recently homeless—has an American heritage of alternative publications that serve the socially and politically marginalized by offering a different perspective than the mainstream media and addressing issues normally ignored by them. From the Civil War era to the present, alternative publications sold or given freely on streets have given voice to causes from abolition and pacifism to immigration, feminism, and working class labor.\textsuperscript{47} \textit{The Catholic Worker}, started by Dorothy Day in 1933, was one significant forerunner to contemporary street papers that still runs today. Currently, there are more than fifty street papers in forty-seven cities across North America.\textsuperscript{48}

Street papers focused on poverty caught on in the United States in the late 1980’s during a worldwide recession that brought an increase in homeless numbers. This, coupled with trends in the mainstream media’s coverage of the homeless in the context of holiday charities and negative one-dimensional portrayals, spurred on the formation of many street papers. Street papers seek to analyze wider reasons for homelessness rather than identify its sole cause as the result of an individual’s personal shortcomings.

The formation of \textit{The Contributor} is difficult to pin down to simply one person or event; it is more a convergence of multiple stories of persons, who for different reasons, became interested in tackling the issue of homelessness through the arts. The stories of


\textsuperscript{48} Some, to name a few, have included Miami’s \textit{Homeless Voice} the only one attached to a shelter, Chicago’s bilingual \textit{Hasta Cuanado}, Cincinnati’s \textit{StreetVibes} (that originally covered the lives of hobos in the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century), and one of the nation’s highest selling papers, Seattle’s \textit{Real Change}. Heinz, “Street Newspapers,” 535.

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four persons involved in the founding of *The Contributor* show how their lives crossed paths at DPC on Wednesdays through the homeless worship and lunch or the Living Room. Their mixture of motives, some religious, some not, brought them to the intersection of the place of DPC.

Tom Wills, an artist and life long member of DPC, had come back to Nashville after college in 1993 and was using some of the church’s upstairs space as an art studio. In return for the church giving him space to do his art, he volunteered there with its homeless ministry. He served at his church’s homeless worship and lunch for several years in different capacities—leading the service in an interim when the church was without a pastor, acting as the door guard, giving the prayer and announcements at the meal, eating with the homeless, and occasionally attending the Living Room. As he became a regular fixture at their worship and lunch, Tom jokes that the homeless mistook him for the pastor: “Over time many of the homeless came to know me by name and I had to correct them when they referred to me as ‘Father Tom.’”

Tom’s desire to work with the homeless at his church grew out of college experiences that brought him to a serious interest in faith and poverty. Tom had taken a world hunger class at Centre College taught by a visiting professor, a Baptist pastor living in a homeless mission in Louisville. Between that class and conversations with his older brother who was “fired up and talking about God” after a medical mission in Ghana, Tom experienced what he called “a revival of faith”:

I first got involved with Campus Crusade for Christ. I went to Daytona Beach to evangelize students which I was horrible at and as I described my church back home, the overwhelming advice I got was, ‘it’s great you want to evangelize, but you should
probably go somewhere else.’ They frowned heavily upon a spirituality of mainline Presbyterian congregation and my interest in poverty. I felt a bit of an outsider there.

Over time, Tom’s interactions with the homeless at DPC began to shape his art:

I became interested in abandoned space and landscape and working with images of cedar trees that were up in the winter field landscapes along interstates and doing interstate median paintings. And often times I saw these stark trees that captured light really well as figures in landscape. I noticed overlooked abandoned trees in these spaces, you know, that weren’t really looked at, so that translated a lot into the homeless for me.

In 2004, Tom was inviting other artists to share his studio space at DPC including Tasha French, a photojournalist and graphic designer he had met at the Wednesday homeless lunch. If the formation of The Contributor can be traced back to one event, it may be the conversation where Tasha made room for a homeless person to appear. In 2002, while Tom was at DPC and working with his passions for faith, poverty, and the arts, Tasha was just a couple of blocks away working in a Kinko’s at the downtown Arcade. A recent college graduate, she had found herself in Nashville with a degree in photojournalism and graphic design but no job in hand. After finding work at the downtown Kinko’s, she began noticing homeless persons around her workplace. One man regularly hung out in front of Kinko’s on a bench and after a couple of months of seeing him, she thought to herself, “This is silly. If he were not homeless and here each day, I would have said hello to him long ago but because he is and I’m not, it’s inappropriate. But it’s not. I am going to work up the courage to go shake his hand and speak to him.” Tasha introduced herself and after some conversations, asked if she could photograph him and then gave him the pictures. Soon, she was contacted by a homeless outreach worker who had seen the pictures and wanted to know if she would like to take
more of other homeless persons. For about two years, Tasha followed the homeless outreach worker around downtown, photographing and interviewing the homeless persons she met. One “hot spot” for them was DPC on Wednesdays. When Tasha met Tom, she had been attending the Wednesday lunch as a part of her project of photographing and interviewing the homeless.

Tasha identifies that moment from 2002—when she reached out to meet the homeless man in front of Kinko’s—as the formational story of The Contributor that led to its eventual existence years later. She is quick to add that she didn’t feel “led” or “called” by God either to see and talk to the homeless man or to start the street paper; rather, it was in her initial encounter with this man where she saw his humanity and recognized their shared vulnerability that she wonders if the divine is present:

I want to be careful not to say that God lead me to shake that guy’s hand in the beginning. I don’t want to leave God out of it, but it’s not the way I tell my story—like I’m the Good Samaritan led by the Lord. For me, the face-to-face interaction is the most inspirational part. I look at that and begin to think, ‘There’s a God.’ I just felt drawn to him as a human being. I saw him everyday and here I was in a place of struggle, not being able to find a job. I was terrified to say hi, but also I was just looking to connect with another human being and to shake myself out of my shell.

For Tasha, her conversation with someone across a social and economic divide not only led to the Contributor’s formation but it also is recreated today in the interactions between vendors on the street corners who see and are seen daily by potential customers as they drive and walk by them.

About three years later in 2007, Tasha was struck by an interview she heard on NPR with a homeless man who had found new life through writing. Lee Stringer, author (with Kurt Vonnegut) of Grand Central Winter, was giving his account of being a
homeless man in NYC and making two discoveries that proved addictive, crack and writing. As Stringer was in active addiction and overcame it, he wrote articles for the NYC’s street paper, *Street News*, and eventually became its editor. Tasha recalls, “I was listening to NPR and Lee Stringer came on. I fell in love, I read the book, and I drove down to New Orleans to meet him and heard his story.”

Tasha had a newspaper background and now she had a passion for the homeless, two things that brought her to the idea of creating a street paper in Nashville. She shared her idea with Tom who invited Kevin, a homeless man, to join them in their discussions. He was aware that Kevin had tried his own hand at creating a street newsletter and has been keeping his own blog (Thehomelessguy.blogspot.com) about homelessness. A middle-aged white man originally from San Diego, Kevin had been in Nashville for over twenty years and homeless off-and-on since the age of 21 when he was discharged from the Navy. He has worked various temp jobs and says that he has struggled to keep work and a stable home due to anxiety, depression, and possibly Asperger’s Syndrome.

At the time of *The Contributor*’s formation Kevin (who now self-identifies as an atheist) called DPC his home church, but he says, looking back, that his faith did not influence his participation in starting the street paper. Instead, it was his desire to change how people viewed the homeless:

It wasn’t a faith-based reason for me to participate in helping to bring this all together. I wanted to correct the misperceptions out there of homelessness. And I think that is also the purpose of *The Contributor*. You know, I had been living on the streets and got money by selling my plasma and they have the t.v. on while you do it. One time, I saw a story on homelessness. And the tech was sticking me and saying, ‘Oh, those people just want to be homeless.’ And I hear him making this pronouncement that is just so untrue
but I can’t say so right then. I wanted to show that we’re not, you know, TV show characters. We’re as diverse and multi-dimensional as the rest of the population.

Kevin wanted people to move beyond their misperception that all homeless personally choose to live in abject poverty and so deserve the street life. After that encounter with the plasma tech, Kevin went to the Downtown Public Library to research how to make a homeless newsletter. After corresponding with the NANSA and the “grand-daddy” of street papers in Seattle, he created a street newsletter using the computer room at the Campus for Human Development and the downtown Kinko’s. “For a couple of months, I sold it at the 4th Avenue entrance of the Arcade for a buck, but I dropped the paper when I got into a Halfway House and a job at Mosco’s convenient store. But I was out of the job and back on the street within a year.”

The idea and initial conversations for The Contributor were unfolding in a larger city context that most say was vital for its formation. Tom recalls the local media’s increasing interest in homelessness brought on, in part, by downtown merchants and residents who, in their efforts at urban re-gentrification, wanted to remove the homeless from their neighborhoods:

The Contributor began in a climate in Nashville where homelessness had been put on the agenda by another organization, the Nashville Homeless Power Project (NHPP) from the Living Room, but the dialogue between the city and the homeless wasn’t happening. It was a one-way conversation, it seemed. The press and the city had been getting a lot of criticism through the NHPP which was constructive, but it wasn’t something the average person, the downtown residents for instance, were going to buy. Their issue was “The homeless have taken over Library Park and Church Street Park and can’t we shut them down?” The Downtown Partnership had already initiated a campaign, “Please Help,
Don’t Give” and had passed an aggressive anti-panhandling bill—it was a win for the downtown partnership wanting an urban lifestyle without poor people.49

Like Tom, Kevin also attributes *The Contributor*’s formation to “it hitting at just the right time and place in Nashville.” The issue of homelessness was, according to Kevin, “really hot with the political scene” when in the early 2000s, the NHPP was holding protests at the Metro Development and Housing Agency for giving the homeless seats on the commission, marching to and around City Hall for additional funds to make more low income housing and living in a provisional Tent City in front of the mayor’s office to show that “Housing is a Human Right.”50 Like Tom, Kevin saw that the NHPP was noble in trying “to fight those getting rid of the homeless” but even if politicians could be persuaded to add more low-income housing (and they were, though only a quarter of what was asked), downtown merchants and residents in the panhandling campaign weren’t moved by the NHPP’s methods and criticisms of their “Please Help, Don’t Give” campaign.

During this time an undergraduate sophomore at David Lipscomb was discovering this whole other world of the city beyond his campus walls. Andrew found himself involved in the NHPP through his friend (and now wife), Lindsey Glenn, who happened to pass by its office in the Arcade and was struck by the statistics on poverty

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49 John Spragens’ article, “Handling Panhandling” in the September 4, 2004 issue of the *Nashville Scene* details the Downtown Partnership’s agenda to which Tom refers. The Downtown Partnership was one between merchants and residents who were pushing for a pair of Metro ordinances, a bill prohibiting panhandling in any location and prescribing punishments for congregating in public parks. The way the bill worded panhandling left even the Salvation Army Christmas bell-ringers at risk of arrest. It did not pass.

that she saw pasted on its windows. They began attending some Living Room meetings and with the mentoring of Charlie Strobel, founder of A Room in the Inn, they put together a group of Lipscomb students to participate in a letter writing campaign and march where they asked Nashville’s mayor to live up to his promises of providing low income housing. Andrew calls it his “initiation into the world of social justice.” A major in English and creative writing editor of a school paper, Andrew combined his academic interests with his new interest in homelessness and volunteered at A Room in the Inn as a poetry teacher. Andrew says that he got involved with the formation of *The Contributor* simply because was “already a part of the homeless conversations in the city and it was the right time, you know, one thing had led to another and we had found ourselves wrapped up in this new found justice to be concerned about. At first, we didn’t know what we were doing. It was not like a thing we set out to do.” While he was at a courthouse rally to keep Tent City open, he ran into Tasha, whom he had met a couple of years earlier at an Ignatian prayer group. Tasha invited him to join their brainstorming conversation about starting a street paper. Eventually, Andrew became the paper’s copyright editor.

Although the street paper’s first office was a bench across the street from DPC, the church offered the homeless paper’s staff some space. Within months of its inception in 2007, *The Contributor* began working out of DPC’s backrooms and now holds vendor meetings in the church sanctuary or chapel on Wednesday afternoons. The first month it sold 500 copies with less than 30 vendors. By 2010, sales rose to 500,000 with nearly

Today, The Contributor is the highest selling street paper in the United States. At any given place across the greater Nashville area, seven days a week, homeless and formerly homeless vendors are selling the paper. As many as a third of the vendors have moved off the streets due to their sales.

The street paper’s name was suggested by Tom:” [The Contributor] could be a good play on words…the underlying concept was that they were contributors to society. This is a business. They are income producing, they are contributors to society as well. I underline that with the training: ‘You’re not a panhandler, you’re a business person.’”

The title gets at the three-part mission that the founders had for the street paper and are listed at the top of each edition: offering diverse perspectives on homelessness contributed by the homeless themselves; offering the homeless and formerly homeless a source of income (since many have limited options because their only address is the Mission that is shunned for job hunting or they have felonies) so they experience themselves as doing honest work and contributing to society; and, creating community between the homeless vendors and the not homeless customers.

The last part of the mission, creating community, developed over time as the street paper staff received profound feedback from customers and vendors about how meaningful their relationships had become. When Tom first wondered if there was another way to dialogue with politicians, the media and downtown merchants and residents about their perceptions of and solutions to homelessness, he “couldn’t foresee

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52 Jennifer Brooks, “For Homeless, Street Paper is a Success Story,” The Tennessean, October 4, 2011.
53 Ibid.
how much Nashville would embraced the street newspaper concept---like no other city in world has. They’ve really seen the person behind the badge and know that they can really reach somebody without having to go through the government or another organization and can see the difference in the person life as they paper on the street.”

Regarding this mission’s goal of creating community, it is important to note that The Contributor, while embraced by many as Tom said, has provided a test to the greater Nashville area, and I will come back to this point both in my conclusion and in my subsequent chapter on The Contributor.

While the identity of this street paper organization has largely been faithful to its various founding visions and stories of seeing the humanity of the homeless and giving them a place to appear, one way that The Contributor’s identity has been tested is in how the staff shares power with the homeless vendors and writers. Consider Ken, the one homeless founder of the street paper. When asked if he had a say in the making and rules of the street paper, Kevin’s response is ambiguous:

I was asked for more input with the paper, but I did not always have a say with the other [founders]. It’s very much a top-down management and they talk less to the homeless and more to the people running the city. Then the homeless have to adapt to them. I don’t know. You know, I was on the mayor’s task force. And then I was asked to help with The Contributor. But I’ve been a ‘token’ homeless person, you know, to give them legitimacy.

Ironically, for a street paper that was formed by non-homeless persons moved by their personal experiences of being with the poor and wanting others to see their humanity, Kevin feels more like a “token” founder who is not really taken seriously. Kevin is now a vendor, but unlike the other three founders, he is not a part of the editorial staff and
does not write for the paper. When I asked him about that, he said that early on, he
“wasn’t allowed to write and be in charge”: “I had written two articles for the first edition
but I was told that the articles were not good enough, that I needed to write and resubmit
them again. As the paper went to press early on, some of us that were homeless became
marginalized, including me. A core group to lead it was forming and I wasn’t let in it.”

Kevin said that as this was happening, it was also becoming harder for him to
participate in the life of DPC for what were practical reasons of travel—at first, he could
ask for or was offered rides to social gatherings, but gradually, “it got old and no one
wanted to come get me and the bus lines didn’t go out to their homes.” He admitted that
whether it was working with the founders of the paper or making friends at the church, he
had difficulty with relationships:

I don’t really have a community. You know, I don’t really want one. I don’t like
people—maybe it’s my anxiety or depression or what I think is Asperger’s—and I like to
keep to myself. Most homeless do. Take two homeless persons that hang together. I’d
call them acquaintances, not friends. They don’t really talk with each other, not really as
persons. They are just watching each others backs as long as it’s to their advantage.

For Kevin, the issue of sharing power and having a say in the rules, is one that involves
his desire (or lack thereof) for and ability to stay in community with others, even when he
receives criticism for his writing. He does not completely trust others to value him
beyond his “token” worth of presenting a homeless face when needed. The test of
sharing power with vendors, giving them a voice in the paper and its rules as well as
creating community both within the paper and outside on the streets with non-homeless
customers is one that continues to stretch The Contributor’s formational identity.

_DPC: “The one-stop shop” for the homeless and a “church on fire”?_
In conclusion, understanding the formational stories and events of the place of Downtown Presbyterian Church and of its three homeless social worlds housed there illumines both the context in which homeless persons coming through the church doors on Wednesdays express and practice their faith and the assumptions and motivations of the founders of these social worlds regarding who they hope to be and how they perceive and care for the homeless. The formational stories of both church and homeless ministries show how features of the larger culture and its responses to poverty—from suburbanization to the growth of soup kitchens to the small group and street paper movements—shape their places. Both church and homeless ministries face challenges that test their formational identities and practices as faithful places where the homeless can appear not as stigmatized matter out of place but as fully human and Beloved. In some ways, the three homeless ministries are themselves tests for the church’s own identity as an urban church being with the poor, for they ask the church to negotiate and re-negotiate their welcoming posture to the homeless in light of problems the homeless bring to the church building and the congregation.

Five common themes emerged from this examination of the formation of DPC and its homeless social worlds. I mention them here because they touch on issues such as place and community with the homeless that I will return to in subsequent chapters and my concluding chapter on defining spirituality among the homeless. First, most of the founders and current leaders involved in these homeless social worlds were motivated primarily from personal encounters with the poor that happened in the Between or interhuman realm (Farley 1990). As Tasha said, it was the face-to-face encounter with
the homeless man at Kinko’s that showed her the divine, rather than her feeling led or called to play the role of the Good Samaritan. Such moments where the founders made room for the homeless stranger to appear as more than matter out of place were experienced as redemptive and putting them in touch with the transcendent. For one like Kevin, faith had no involvement, but for others, those experiences then informed and deepened their understanding of scripture stories and God. They did not talk about first wanting to form places for the homeless to appear out of commitments to doctrinal beliefs. In other words, their inscriptive traditions of scripture and theological writings, while important to some, were not the primary inspiration.

Second, the founders of the homeless social worlds at DPC admitted that they were not looking to start a homeless worship and lunch or a homeless support group or a street paper. They used language like “it just happened” and “I wasn’t seeking this out” and “one thing just led to another, so I stayed with it.” For all, a chance conversation with the other across class lines—be it at a church door or a downtown Kinko’s or a welcome to someone who had stumbled on an established church fellowship time—played a significant part in the founding of homeless ministries. That is, these founders practiced the “holy habit” of adventure by taking a risk and starting a conversation with the Other (Shoop 2010). The mundane, often overlooked encounter of an impromptu face-to-face conversation become seed work for something greater. Even though the homeless worship and soup kitchen lunch style may not be the most faithful expression of DPC’s identity as an urban church whose congregants are working for rather than being with the poor, it provided the place for such chance conversations that gave birth to
another homeless social world, the Living Room, that is more faithfully practicing being with the poor in its weekly meetings of homeless and “homies” and its grassroots offshoot that works for justice, the NHPP. Most DPC congregants are not involved with its church’s midweek homeless service and lunch, but one member, Tom Wills, found himself there and it gave him experiences that informed his co-founding of The Contributor.

Third, and connected to the experience founders and leaders reported having of serendipitously stumbling into the formation of their homeless ministry, they all pointed out that DPC was a natural meeting space for the homeless to gather. As a downtown place, it was already on (or could easily be added to) the ambulatory circuit of many homeless as they walked from the two Missions or Room in the Inn or hung out a block away at the library and Church Street Park. Andrew, The Contributor copy editor explained why the paper was situated at the church because of a member’s ties and its location:

I’d say we’re at DPC because of Tom who has been a member of DPC his whole life and he’s a Contributor founder and so he’s the main link for the relationships. But also because it’s the obvious place to be around a group of people on Wednesdays who’d be qualified to sell it. The Contributor is really part of the same world of the downstairs of DPC. It’s how some of our vendors find us. We’re just a part of the same world.

Doris Farley, one of the Living Room leaders, explained for their group, “The church offers the place, but we’re not of the church…My own church gives us money and supports what we do but we’d never do this there. DPC is the obvious place to do the Living Room.” Samantha, a more recent Living Room leader, said, “Look, if we switch out our location, it would die. We can switch out our leaders, but not the space.”
All founders and current leaders perceive their particular ministry working in tandem with and supporting the others. The Living Room leaders see their support group as a place people can come “hang out” after worship and lunch and before their Contributor meetings and they tell people about both. Its formerly homeless leaders, John and Madge, discovered it in part from their having first attended the Wednesday worship and lunch. Rev. Locke and some Living Room leaders and participants have written for the street paper. Street paper vendors and some of the staff have been to Living Room meetings. Madge, a formerly homeless person and Living Room leader says, “If you [a homeless person] just shut up and listen, you’ll see this church is a one stop shop for something to eat, and get help and worship and get hooked up with a job. To me that church is on fire on Wednesdays, all the ministry going on in that building.”

Fourth, while the location of DPC was deemed crucial by founders for their social worlds to form and provided them a shared space by which they feel connected, the congregational members of DPC were another matter. Some founders and leaders remarked on lacking a relationship or experiencing tension with the DPC congregants.54 Doris Farley, one of the Living Room leaders, said, “Their commitment to the homeless with the Wednesday meals and the newspaper—it’s not that they don’t do a lot, but this is

54 Sociologist Courtney Bender notes in her most recent book The New Metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination that many main line Protestant churches today play host to groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous or dance and yoga classes with whom they may have little or no ideological or interpersonal connection. Bender finds that while congregation members may see such groups as mere tenants, many groups tend to imagine the church space that they temporarily inhabit as connecting them somehow to the church host’s religious mission. The New Metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 33-4.
ours.” Don, one of the Living Room founders, admitted that he “feels uneasy about being down at the church and not always feeling welcome” because he has heard some complaints about the homeless “wearing out” the parlor furniture. “They never do anything with us,” he said, “I mean, they do a lot for the homeless, you know, I nominated them for Presbyterian congregation of the year, they sponsor so much and really reach out, but no one comes from the church to the Living Room.” Interestingly, Samantha views this as a strength and prefers for congregants not to get involved: “Stuff happens at my church [Second Presbyterian] all the time that is not from our church. I don’t know that we at the Living Room have ever really invited congregation members here. We already have an imbalance of leaders with the homeless coming. Sometimes we’re half the people in the room.” The church offers a material place from which these homeless social worlds form and flourish but, without strong interpersonal connections to congregants, the homeless social worlds are not really “of” it.

Because it has a more visible and larger presence, The Contributor founders talked about having more “growing pains” with the congregation than the Living Room:

They’ve been hospitable to give us space and the dynamics are interesting—early on, no one had a clue we’d be the size we are today…so there have been some growing pains, little things slipped. We messed up a piece of the floor and there was one rough episode when we were encouraged to look for another place, there’s this, “we’re a small church and historic building” thing and they feel like, this little non profit takes up more space than they do now and there’s been tensions around that. It comes and goes but on the whole there’s a mutual respect and at the end of the day, we affirm one another.

Tasha expressed similarly this ambiguous relationship that their homeless social world has with DPC. The church website says that the “paper has operated here since the beginning,” but Tasha gives a different account in which “we were regarded with
suspicion at first and had to start out on a bench. We were only allowed to have meetings but not inhabit the space with our office.” While she says that she “is in love with the building and the people underneath it,” she concludes with Andrew that their unforeseen growth has been problematic for some at the church: “It expected us to fail and now there’s a sense of resentment. For instance, we have two offices upstairs and five downstairs. They won’t give us any more space and we don’t have keys to the church because they’re concerned we’ll think we own it. The church is the greatest blessing but it is also pushing back on us.”

Lastly, with two of these homeless social worlds, the Living Room and The Contributor, a homeless person was a co-founder who helped bring it into being but did not stay with it because of their own issues of mental illness and distrust of and difficulties of being in a community. Both Karl and Kevin show the good of what can happen when another saw and heard them as more than a crazy or dangerous street bum. Yet, even though the two admittedly desired a place for themselves and other homeless to appear—to be seen and heard as fully human beyond stigmatized stereotypes, their own struggles common to homelessness in part prevented them from sustained participation in the very social worlds they had a part in forming. They illustrate the fragile and provisional state of community made in these places.

As both the church and the homeless social worlds undergo a constant process of consolidating and negotiating their identities as places where the homeless are welcomed to appear, this impacts the homeless persons participating (or choosing not to participate) in them. The next chapters will offer an analysis of the homeless social worlds at DPC.
and how the homeless perceive this “one stop shop” – how they pick and choose what to attend out of these offerings for possible expressions of their faith and opportunities for community.

Chapter 3 will provide an analysis of the Living Room support group meetings as well as interviews with participants. In it I will examine the Living Room as a small group community and six of its practices and activities that make it a faithful place where the homeless can experience themselves as fully human, encounter God’s presence, and express their faith.
By forming a support group that welcomed homeless persons to be seen and heard as more than matter out of place for an hour each Wednesday afternoon, Karl, a homeless person, and pastor-activist Don Beisswenger were creating a new kind of community located at Downtown Presbyterian Church. As Brother D says above in his poetry that he likes to share at the Living Room, the homeless typically are treated as “Mr. Never Been Never Wuz.” The Living Room counters this negation of humanity by being a sort of sound or mike check as Brother D calls it, where the homeless can share their point of view and “wisdom” that goes unheard by the larger world. It is a place many participants and leaders describe as spiritual and where they can encounter the sacred. Aaron is a divorced fifty-four-year-old African American and father of two who has been homeless off and on since he was teenager. He says this about the Living Room: “I go because I feel closer to God there. Everyone’s in a spiritual mood. I mean, my body in there feels...
relaxed and everyone gets a chance to express themselves, good and bad. Everyone seems in a positive mood so I feel spiritual. I feel like a family presence, a family thing. Especially when we join hands at the end, that seems like a family thing.”

Having seen how the homeless have been treated historically in the place of Nashville in Chapter 1 and the complicated formation of DPC and its three homeless social worlds in Chapter 2, this third chapter takes up the Living Room. Chapter 3 examines how the Living Room, in providing for the homeless what many do not find in a church, is a caring community and how the Living Room is a faithful or what some participants call a spiritual place where they can feel close to God and experience being fully human. This chapter looks at six Living Room activities and practices accomplishing this: storytelling and empathetic listening; sleeping; lamenting; and hoping, particularly through celebrating milestones and speaking in proverbs that encourage patience in divine providence. As I examine these activities, I will bring in Robert Wuthnow’s seminal study of North American small and support group spirituality to illumine where a context of homelessness needs to be considered in such an account of spirituality.¹ Finally, this chapter also points out moments where homeless participants,

¹ In Wuthnow’s study of the growing small and support group phenomenon in North America, he argues that small and support groups are a vital part of North American spirituality and that they are changing how individuals understand community and the sacred. In this chapter I point out what the Living Room shares in common with Wuthnow’s findings (storytelling as a small group caring activity). More often I point out where the Living Room differs because of its homeless context: it does and can replace family for some homeless; its moments of empathy are not done to promote narcissism, and it allows for moments of sadness in lamenting. The last two points challenge Wuthnow’s critique that support group spirituality tends to promote self-absorption and force storytellers to give only happy endings. Robert Wuthnow, Sharing
the group leaders, and I see limitations and tensions as to how this support group continues to be a faithful place that, as Karl said, “ignites their spirits” and allows them to regard themselves as more than matter out of place.

It is necessary to preface this chapter with a word about the Living Room’s context as a residual oral or traditional culture which is one where people make sense of the world primarily through stories, proverbs, relationships and concrete thinking rather than writing, academic discourse, introspection and categorical thinking.\(^2\) I discovered this to be true in my own interactions with leaders and participants. After the confusion from my once mentioning “dissertation,” I tried not to use large words that might be off-putting. One of the formerly homeless leaders, John, sometimes invited me to share and said words like “class,” “college,” or “book learning” in an affected accent that reminded me of *My Fair Lady*’s Professor Higgins teaching Eliza Dolittle to speak correctly. I interpreted such moments as John pointing out differences between his oral culture and mine by John making jabs at a written culture that supposes itself to be superior. The Living Room provides what Tex Sample calls “folk healing”—a small group in which people are not spilling out their inner feelings and thoughts as much as they are sharing and giving advice and support through stories and sayings. The Living Room also is an example of an oral culture’s “gatherings” practice, whereby people bond when they get together in close proximity, attend to one common object (listening to one another as they

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share information about living on the streets) and join in activities that can heighten emotion (lamenting, celebrating, and the end ritual of summaries and praying in a hand-held circle). As a residual oral/traditional culture, storytelling and proverbial talk are common Living Room activities that foster community and to which I will return later.

The Living Room as an alternative to church

John is a sixty-five-year-old African American homeless participant who has been attending the support group for years. A Nashville native and Contributor vendor, John was homeless for over fifteen years when he inhabited an abandoned bus on Murfreesboro Road, and he considers himself no longer homeless now that he stays with his aunt. At one meeting, John suddenly announced to everyone, “I appreciate ya’ll. Not many places I can go to have a real conversation, get a hug and hold hands, get heard. I can’t even go to church and get this. I’m looking for love and I find it here.” John’s remark about finding love in being touched and heard at the Living Room rather than through a church congregation’s life and worship was something I heard repeatedly from other participants. Granted, this was not the case for every participant, but many say they come to the Living Room in part because it gives them acceptance and support in their extreme poverty and struggles that they find absent at churches.

Ken, a single and childless forty-something African American from Chicago, is one such person who has come to the Living Room for over six months because “I feel I

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get a say and can make my own decisions here. I always have a choice and can say no to anything. I like that I can be heard or ask a question. It provides me with a forum for speaking up. I can ask for help and they’ll either help me or get me to it. Lots of churches won’t do any of this. If I walk into the average church, not gonna happen.”

Danny is another Living Room participant who has not found church to be a supportive community as he faces challenges of transience and unemployment. A single 41-year-old white man, Danny has a gentle and quiet demeanor. Slight of build, he walks with a dragging limp. His deformed face often lights up with a wide smile and expressive brown eyes. Danny says that he comes to the Living Room because he “likes to talk to people. I can share my thoughts and lots of people don’t want to hear my ideas or my thoughts. Here, it’s about me and not about out there where it’s crazy, cruel, and mean.” He began crying and said,

I know I’m supposed to say I feel closer to God in church, but I’ve always had to do things on my own. I went to a nondenominational church in Illinois and they didn’t care about me as a person. They didn’t want to do nothing with me…My church was not helpful. They didn’t seem to care if I needed a home. It was my problem, not theirs. They pushed me aside.

Church for Danny was one place he felt father from God. There, he says, “people don’t listen to my suggestions and when I say something for me, they just look the other way. I’m real serious. I might as well be talking to the wall a lot of times.” Danny, like Ken, sees the Living Room as a place where he has value and treats him as a person with gifts to offer others, such as listening to their stories, an activity where he says he feels close to God. Interestingly, he blames his predicament partly on other homeless persons who come to church as “takers”: “the people I know go to church for food or clothing and not
for worship or being together. Those people are like a big vacuum and make it harder for me, you know? If I’m there just for, say a box of cokes, well, then I’m there just to take and I want to give too.”

Madge, one of the Living Room leaders who is formerly homeless, says she encountered hypocrisy at church as opposed to “being real” in the Living Room:

Just because you go to church, well, that’s where half the chaos been with the people. You know what I’m saying? With the type of churches I’m going to, people ain’t all they say. They judging people. I don’t know what my problem was with them. I clung to church once a week but you got something wrong if you’re not doing what they say do. It don’t work. It just be so much junk. I went to one church for six years when I very first got clean. I was sleeping in church cause I’d work the third shift and was called out for it. But it was my safe place, right? That’s where I was supposed to be, straight from work, right? Man, it was phony.

Finally, Anita contrasts the Living Room to her church experiences. A 48-year-old African American, Anita is unmarried and has children and grandchildren. When Anita talked about the Living Room, she began crying “tears of joy.” She started attending the Living Room five years ago when she had come to DPC for help procuring an identification card. She found it to be a place for support particularly in her recovery from alcoholism:

I thought the church was the hospital of hospitals. It is supposed to be a place of refuge, a place of healing, deliverance, and restoration. Not the case. I couldn’t tell anyone but God about my addiction and He already knew. Telling anyone else would have brought such disgrace to my family and church folk. Little did I know then that they, too, had many of their own spots and wrinkles. As a result of my fear, I lived a life that was made so painful from alcohol and shame. The Living Room was my real deliverance and blessing. I found myself there.

Anita grew up attending a Pentecostal church that she describes as “very strict.” At an early age she saw that her pastor and church knew it “had a whole lot of sick folks in it”
but it ignored their problems or her mother’s problems from an abusive relationship. She blames her habit of “running” from churches today on this formative experience as well as how her mother and grandmother—who took her to church—talked about God: “they taught me less about God as love, as a forgiving God and more that God was angry at times—if it was thundering and lightning, ooh, he was angry, so be quiet, because he’s not pleased with who we are. It put such a strain on my life.”

When Anita had gotten some time in recovery and found work through *The Contributor*, she returned to church. She worried she needed healing from her reluctance to attend church that might be a sin. However, in returning to church life, she changed her mind when she had another negative experience of it:

I took a curve ball and went AME. I’m going through something with this particular church….There’s always somebody criticizing. Everybody say they like you, don’t like you. Hard facts for me to swallow because I try to be as genuine as I can but they talk behind my back and into my face. Never seen such backbiting. People know I sell *The Contributor*—different ones frown on me. AME is like the elite of the black church and I’m just a people person, at times I got ways of a peasant. I still like to dumpster dive, I still like to pick pennies up from the ground, but I carry myself pretty decent. They was having a clothing drive and I’m all for giving away clothes, that’s what I do best, it’s a part of my ministry, so I’m excited, ‘Oh boy, I’m at this church, I can do something at my church’ and several members crushed my world. One made a comment, ‘We don’t want no anything of yours because it’s gonna be a reflection on our auxillary and church.’ I want to turn around and say, ‘You know, I may get clothes at Good Will and the flea market but I dress well. Why would you think I’d give away something bad? Why say something bad?’ If you look a certain way, act a certain way, there are church people always gonna give you a hard time.

Ken, Danny, Madge and Anita all point to some of the social stigmas that people in poverty can experience in relation to church. All express a lack of social connections at church as well as a lack of being seen as able to give something valuable back to a church community that would affirm their dignity. For some like Anita, the barrier
involves a past history where her church focused more on rules and less on helping, even
denying her family’s problems as well as her own shameful substance abuse. Feeling
unaccepted is also due to contempt about clothes as Anita finds at her current AME
church. For others like Madge the source of derision is the unacceptable bodily
propriety of sleeping in worship. All respond to such churches by rejecting church in
return, calling the church (as Anita and Madge do) hypocritical for focusing so much on
being a place of respectability rather than compassion. They feel out of place in a church
and even, as Danny says, far from God, so, in their isolated practice of religion they have
turned to the Living Room. There, as Madge says, “We all do it together—my peeps, the
community, everybody brings something to the table.”

“I feel like a family presence, a family thing”: Community

Jason is a white 32-year-old homeless man from Lynchburg, Virginia who has
been coming to the Living Room for over a year. Jason feels like he has no community
because he has no real residence that places him among others: “I think community is

4 Tex Sample talks about clothing being a significant factor in the poor feeling excluded
and choosing not to attend church. Sample, Hard Living People and Mainstream
Christians (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 13, 47-48. Feminist theologian and
ethicist Joan Sakalas did a study that found half of the women in a homeless shelter
would feel uncomfortable asking a minister for help for fear he/she would judge their
clothing. Sakalas, “Face to Face: Transforming Faith-Based Outreach,” in Welfare
Policy, Feminist Critiques, ed. Elizabeth Bounds, Pamela Brubaker, and Mary Hobgood
(Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1999), 201-12. Clothing as a barrier to church attendance by
the poor is also addressed by sociologist of religion Susan Crawford Sullivan in her study
of poor mothers on welfare and child and family psychologist, Richard Weissbourd in the
context of poor working class families. Sullivan, Living Faith: Everyday Religion and
Mothers in Poverty (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 162. Weissbourd,
“Beyond villages: New Community Building Strategies for Disadvantaged Families,” in
your area you reside in with your people and I don’t really reside anywhere.” Linda White, a former DPC pastor who helped lead the Living Room, says this is what the support group aims to provide: “they needed a neighborhood, they had no one to talk with—what we take for granted—and so the Living Room aims to create community among people who don’t know a lot about it or don’t trust it.”

Don calls the Living Room’s approach to homelessness “unworldly” because it “really is about becoming human” through gathering homed and homeless persons into a community that shares resources, concerns, and joys. This community, for Don, is one where they come to trust, share and respond to one another and be a kind of “semi family group.” Madge also refers to this as “my family” and comes to it herself for support before her family because “they don’t really hear me cause they so busy judging.” Kim, a 19-year-old African American single woman is recently homeless after running away from home when, after bouncing among three family members, her sister’s boyfriend tried to sexually assault her. She told the group in one meeting, “Most of my life, I haven’t felt motivation or appreciation by my family. You all are my people. I feel that here and keep coming back for this.” John, another Living Room leader who is formerly homeless, sometimes calls people “my children” or “my family” and will greet people at the door with a welcoming exclamation, “Ah, now, we’re home!” that invites participants to consider the Living Room as their home and to see that their presence matters to and completes the group. Particular Living Room activities and practices work to accomplish this.

“A safe place to tell my story”: Empathetic Listening

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One Living Room activity for building community and becoming more human is telling and listening to life stories where homeless participants can both find and give care and support. Sociologist Brene Brown who has done work on shame defines shame as a feeling that there is something about me unworthy of connection—of feeling valued, accepted and affirmed.5 Brown says that the cycle of shame begins in and then leads to disconnection including a psychological disconnection where one feels powerless and hopeless to change a situation. Brown’s understanding of shame as linked to feelings of disconnection help to see then how the Living Room activity of storytelling and listening can challenge a homeless person’s matter out of place mentality. Storytelling in small and support groups has been identified by sociologist of religion Robert Wuthnow as a spiritual practice of care whereby a participant can feel acceptance, concern, and God’s presence.6 Experiencing support and care through storytelling has the potential to counter feelings of isolation and shame that some homeless may experience.

Ken illustrates this. Ken says he is a college dropout who has fallen in and out of homelessness for the past eight years due to substance abuse. The most difficult aspect of being homeless for Ken is “this feeling that I don’t matter” that he says he gets from his family and the larger world: “I hate that I’m not stable and so I’m on the fringe of society and outside the bounds of normal in the world.” Ken shares that he is not in contact with his family because he feels worse talking to them: “I realize that in talking to my siblings

5 Brene Brown, I Thought It was Just Me (but it isn’t): Making the Journey from “What will people think?” to “I am enough.” (New York: Penguin, 2007), 29.
6 Wuthnow, Sharing the Journey, 286-7.
I’m not living up to their expectations. They tell me I’m a disappointment and don’t look up to me anymore.” Ken goes on to say that he wants to spend time at the downtown public library “where he can feel more normal, you know, get out and about. But they don’t want you there, you know, you’re seen as untrustworthy or in the way, like I’m just hanging out without work.” Ken feels like his homelessness labels him as morally suspect for his family and “in the way” of productive, contributing members of society so that he cannot turn to his family for support or have easy access to public spaces. He has been coming to the Living Room for over six months and says,

Here I count. I think the Living Room is teaching me to express myself. I can find a space where I’m valued, where even a homeless person can matter—you may not matter to wider society, but here, you do. That’s the kind stuff you gotta take back to become whole again because in the Living Room you lose all that feeling unvalued and being labeled as untrustworthy just because you’re out of a home or work.

Ken, like a few others, said that one of his favorite things about the Living Room meetings was the end ritual. Before the prayer and holding of hands in a circle, someone gives a summary of the group’s discussion by repeating back to the group in condensed form what each person shared. This was often my role, and I noticed as I gave summaries, many nodded, saying, “yes,” or “that’s it.” Occasionally, faces registered surprise that I recalled and used their own words, and sometimes a person might say, ‘Wow, you really got me.” Ken says he enjoys the summaries because it makes him feel valued when he hears someone showing they have listened to him. He also says that during these summaries “I like to close my eyes and start praying then, lifting our stuff to God and thanking Him for a place I can be heard.”
Some say they turn to the Living Room as a surrogate family where they can talk honestly about their struggles without judgment. Wuthnow, on small groups, says that they can never replace our deepest supports of family and close friends, but the Living Room does just that for some homeless who are alienated from family or lack strong friendship ties.\(^7\) Phyllis and Lisa are two such participants. Phyllis is a 52-year-old white woman from Clarksville. A divorced mother and grandmother, she was living with James, a divorced father and Vietnam veteran, for over ten years when they lost their home and work because of substance abuse. For the past seven months, they have been staying at the Missions and occasionally “vacation” at a motel. They have been attending the Living Room for a few months. Phyllis says,

I was so ashamed we lost our home and job that I still haven’t talked to my son living here in Nashville. I can’t let him know I’m at the homeless shelter. I have a sister who owns a catering company and drives a Mercedes and another sister is a secretary for a CEO. I’m the black sheep. I’m this close to calling them cause I’m one of God’s children no matter if I’m homeless or not, but I can’t. They won’t see that. For now, I can come to the Living Room. You can feel the Spirit in the room when people talk and I like to listen to where they are at and get advice on my life I can’t get from my family.

Lisa is a white 41-year-old woman from Ohio who recently began attending the Living Room. A divorced mother of two, Lisa is a dental hygienist who lost her work because of her substance abuse. For the past three years, she has had thirty to forty different addresses. Lisa says, “I worked my ass off to get into dental school and get through it. Now here I am. I need money to get ahead, but I have no job and a $500 phone bill. I’m not giving up but being homeless fucks with you mentally. I mean, it

\(^7\) Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey*, 344.
leaves me thinking, I’m not good enough, you know?” She laughs, “I’m a mess. I am. I
don’t like me. I do feel like damaged goods.”

Lisa says she “burned too many bridges” with her family who won’t talk to her,
so she turns to the Living Room to fill that void. It gives Lisa a place to talk to others
when she feels like she has no one to trust:

Early on I was emotionally abused by my mom. My dad left when I was fifteen. My
mom died years ago. I have trust issues. I don’t have close friends. I don’t have a true
confidant for good advice. So I feel all alone out here. This is why I like the Living
Room. It gives me a place to share without judgment. I just get lost—emotionally,
mentally, spiritually—and wonder how do I prioritize my issues. The Living Room helps.
It is a safe place to tell my story, all of it. I’d go everyday if they had it.

For Lisa, Phyllis, and Ken, the Living Room provides them with what they cannot find in
family and friends—a place of connection and listening—so in some small measure, for
them, it counters the disconnection and shame that homelessness entails.

Repeatedly, shame experiences come up in the Living Room: being turned down
for a membership at the YMCA or being unable to buy a meal because of money; losing
out on a job or a housing opportunity because of a past felony or having the Mission as an
address; feeling stared at on the streets while scraping for change or a cigarette; falling
into addiction after a period of staying clean. When the homeless tell such stories and
they hear others relate to them in a nonjudgmental way, this creates empathy. “Shame
resilience” is what Brown names the ability to give and receive empathy. She calls
empathy an antidote to shame because in it, we are able to recognize that our most

isolating experiences that might provoke shame are also the most universal.\(^9\) This recognition is what Maya Angelou means when she says that storytelling can be healing: “If I tell my story right, you can recognize yours in mine.”\(^{10}\) Brown draws on British nursing scholar, Theresa Wiseman, whose definition of empathy has four defining attributes: to be able to see the world as others see it, to be nonjudgmental, to understand a person’s feelings, and to communicate your understanding of that person’s feelings.\(^{11}\) These four attributes show up in the Living Room in non-verbal cues, like nods of “I know what you mean, keep talking” as well as verbal messages of acceptance such as, “I get it,” “It’s okay, you’re not alone,” and “I’ve been there, too.” According to Wuthnow’s study on small and support group spirituality, these empathetic cues are expressions of support that can foster community.\(^{12}\)

One of the moments of giving and receiving empathetic support in storytelling came with Tasha, a young single white woman. At her first meeting, she introduces herself and says she is nineteen and new to the streets. She talks about her abusive family life and how her parents kicked her to the side because of her coke and meth addiction. She thanks God that she has been clean for three weeks. She came up here from Panama City with her boyfriend who just got out of prison. She wanted a fresh start. She felt her

\(^{10}\) Angelou is talking about how her storytelling about shameful and isolating experiences such as racism and sexual abuse was healing. Angelou, “Sacred Stories: Mama and Uncle Willy,” Presentation at the annual Trinity Institute Conference. Trinity Episcopal Church, New York City, USA, 1990.  
boyfriend needed her, that when he was with her, he stopped drinking and was a better person. She began to break down as she shared how he had used her. He took their money and left her alone in this new city. She found some people who assured her help, but they stole her car. She spent the night outside for the first time and got caught by the police. At the courthouse, she ran into Anita selling *The Contributor* who suggested she come here. She said she was scared because she didn’t know anyone, she didn’t know where to go, and she had no money.

Sandy, a young white woman from Ohio, sitting next to Tasha, pats her hand. She invited Tasha to come back to the Women’s Mission with her. She told her the names of the better counselors there, gave Tasha her dorm and bed number, and reassured her that “she’d have her back, just stick with me there cause it’s better to have people. I’m going through this too and I know how you feel. I just told the group here how I had my bag of clothes stolen last week.” Seven, a young man from Kenya, quietly handed his bus pass to me to give to Tasha and said, “I remember coming here and not knowing a soul or how I’d make it.” Coyote, a 36-year-old white man from Nashville, offered her his cell phone for her to use to make any calls she’d need as he says, “I had to sleep in my car trunk one winter and was caught by the police. You are a strong woman. You’d make a great prison guard.” Anita is watching all of this and murmuring thanks to Jesus. Don tells Tasha she can be proud of her three weeks of sobriety and points out that this is what community is all about and she is invited to come back and share again where she is.

Later, as Coyote reflected on listening to and responding to Tasha, he said really looked forward to Living Room meetings where he could hear stories from newcomers.
like her because he liked “to let them know Nashville is a community that cares.” When I asked him what he did to let them know that, he said, “I’ve also been homeless. I know what it’s like. Tell me your problems and I’ll want to, maybe be able to, help. The vibe in the Living Room is one that says, ‘You’re not alone.’”

Anita, Coyote, Seven, and Sandy in responding to Tasha’s story show what Tex Sample calls an “empathetic core” that is central to the ethics of working class and “hard living” people who, as a traditional/oral culture, think in terms of relationships, sayings, and storytelling rather than theory, propositions, and discourse. Sample makes a case for how the ability to tell stories and make moral arguments through stories is a significant ethical skill. This is a skill that some Living Room participants may have already gained practice through 12 Step program meetings where studies have shown storytelling’s therapeutic function of fostering empathy. Sample calls the process “scenario thinking” where listening to one story triggers in the listener’s mind her own story to sort out empathetic associations and communal relations that would be entailed in her response.

While they do not go into all of the specifics of their own stories, “scenario thinking” seems to be at work with Sandy, Seven, and Coyote in their empathetic statements and actions with Tasha. This is worth noting for a few reasons. First, if the homeless are experiencing disconnection and shame, in the Living Room they can

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experience even for a short time connection through giving and receiving empathy. I do not think this can be underestimated. Anita says that her own movement into empathetic listening in the Living Room was what first opened her up to wanting to get out of her substance abuse:

When I first came to the Living Room, I’m sitting there listening to stories but I’m thinking about what did I make selling the paper and what can I let go of to get my alcohol. I’m running through my list of what to let go of, deodorant, tissues, but the more I listened to their stories, the more I got to not thinking about myself. Like, I was hearing Anita say, ‘Girl, you need five more sells to get your alcohol and—wait a minute, she just said she lost her baby, Do you remember when you lost yours? Oh man, she’s broken. Damn.’ It took several times of coming. I heard more stories, I started feeling the pain of others and knowing what it was like. I wanted to strive for better. The Living Room gave me some kind of accountability, like I wanted to be there for them cause I could relate and I needed to be better for myself to do that.

Second, the homeless persons showing care and support through storytelling are looking Tasha in the eye as they listen to her and one even touches her in a gesture of support. If many homeless spend the majority of their days in postures of avoidance where they look down or away from people in an effort to stay safe, this changes here, at least for a short time, once a week. This is similar to what McClintock Fulkerson found at work in her ethnographic study of an interracial congregation’s practice of storytelling whereby empathetic listening made people appear across racial lines and changed their racialized bodily proprieties during their gatherings.\(^\text{16}\) While this example of Tasha’s story shows empathetic support across gender and race, the more significant issue here may be that the homeless simply have the opportunity to be more fully human with

showing and receiving compassion for one another and their open bodily proprieties reflect that.

Interestingly, feeling heard and empathized with is a feature of support groups that has been critiqued by Wuthnow. He argues that in the North American culture where the quest for self-esteem is already so blown out of proportion, small and support groups are merely feeding the beast of narcissism. Wuthnow questions the moral capacity of support group communities to make better people when they tend to encourage participants to focus solely on feeling validated, thus distorting empathetic listening.\(^{17}\) However, Wuthnow does not take into his account of support group communities one that is comprised of homeless and formerly homeless persons where, as Sample finds among the hard living’s oral culture and as seen in the Living Room responses to Tasha, empathetic listening to stories can be an exercise in ethical thinking and lead to compassionate action.

Lastly, the homeless perceive that God is in this empathetic listening. Gary, a 54-year-old white man from Oakland, TN who has been coming for four years, says that he feels close to God in the Living Room “because you got people in there who listen and teach us how to listen. When I talk, I feel like they really get where I am.” John says the Living Room has taught him how to love through listening and then he goes out into the world to share it with his Contributor customers. He says God has called him to come to

\(^{17}\) To make this critique, Wuthnow draws on Robert Bellah’s *Habits of the Heart* (1988) which expresses concern about religion getting reconfigured into individual therapeutic needs as he famously illustrated with Sheila and Sheilaism, a faith in God mediated by “her own little voice.” Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey*, 344-5.
the Living Room to listen because, thanks to God, he has made it and can relate to others in homelessness:

I listen more because of my homeless thing. It was terrible. It kept me mad and down all the time but I’m glad the Lord brought me to the Living Room. He sends me to lots of places that a pastor would not go for money. He sends me here, to those falling through the cracks to listen because I’ve been through the cracks and had people go through the cracks to get to me. And I’m just returning the favor cause I’ve been there. It’s a crying shame when you can’t hear the birds sing.

John listens to people share their stories partly as gratitude to God for bringing him through hard times but also he is acting out of empathy. He feels empathetic listening to others sharing a “homeless thing” is an appropriate response to God’s call and an expression of his faith.

*Having “a shoulder to lay his head on”: Sleeping*

> When I asked participants about the Living Room’s “vibe,” repeated descriptions included, “relaxed,” “peaceful,” and “quiet.” Danny explains: “It is nice to get away from the noise and mean people. At the Mission where I stayed for a year, there’s always fighting and screaming and I’m not like that. Noise scares me. The Living Room is quiet and set up like another room at a home.”

> Having access to safe places for talking is something that seems to allow the Living Room participants to feel more fully human. Danny looks forward to the Living Room meetings because in them he does not worry about his safety and being taken advantage of by people. He says “to survive, I have to ignore people and leave them alone. I wait to go last in lines. I don’t shove or push or look at people, but when I’m in [the Living Room], it’s like I’m just having a normal conversation.” In DPC’s
Wednesday worship service and lunch many homeless persons avert their eyes from others and look down, but in the Living Room, many homeless participants will look up and look in the eyes of others while they converse.

Of course, not every homeless person experiences the Living Room as so safe that they can shed their homeless habituations when they come on Wednesday afternoons for an hour. An unspoken rule I was introduced to in this homeless social world was that you do not under any circumstance touch anyone’s things. When Miss Mary Kay, an older African American who is a Living Room regular, walked in with bags and put them down on the last empty chair, I reached out to help move them so she’d have room to sit. This might have been an accepted motion of common courtesy and respect for an elder in a room of housed persons, but Miss Mary Kay snapped at me, “Never touch someone’s things!” A few participants in the room gave me looks of incredulity and wariness. Embarrassed, I stammered an apology and received a lesson in the interpersonal space in the homeless world.

That said, for many participants the Living Room remains a place to let down their bodily defenses. Gary calls the place “peaceful” because “I can get out of the world for a minute. Sometimes I like to sleep.” Likewise, Lenore, a 43-year-old African American who has come off and on for years with her fiancé Barry, says: “I go for peace of mind. When I am in that space, I feel relaxed and want to go to sleep.” Sleeping in the Living Room is possible for some homeless because they experience in their bodies the feeling of being in a safe place. It may be strange to say that one activity of a support group is sleep. In fact, for most support groups, having sleeping members would be a
signal for a leader to ask them to leave or consider dropping out until they are ready to be fully present in a public space and time of day not meant for sleeping. Theoretically, sleeping in the Living Room would be a violation of social norms assuming sleep is to be done at night in the privacy of one’s own home and bedroom. However, for a support group comprised mostly of homeless persons, more often than not, dozing off is just a part of the support group experience. Homeless lives are ordered so that losing sleep is a given, and the loss is stressful. Sleep outside and you might stay awake from uncomfortable weather or your lack of bedding. You might also be vigilant for attacks or police arrests for sleeping in public. Sleep in the Mission and you are on guard for violent outbreaks. Studies show that sleep disruptions occur among the homeless at higher rates than domesticated persons and negatively impact their health.18

Jason is perhaps the best example of the Living Room activity of sleeping. A 33-year-old white man from Lynchburg, Virginia, Jason says he became homeless eight years ago not because of mental illness or substance abuse but because his grandparents and parents died. The loss of his support system was compounded by his inability to keep a steady income due to his not finishing high school and “being slow in book

learning.” Most nights Jason panhandles downtown and then “roughs it,” but he prefers staying at churches through A Room in the Inn. Every once in a while, Jason will announce that he is leaving Nashville and give his good-byes, but then he returns the following Wednesday and tells us his travel plans fell through. For over a year, Jason has been a regular at the Living Room where he will greet people and then fall asleep. Leaders will wake him at the end for him to share and join in the closing circle of prayer.

When I asked Jason why he comes to the Living Room, he offers, “It is helpful to me with its relaxed feel. It is very much a safe place—safe to me means non-violent and alcohol and drug free, easy going. I feel closer to God when I’m in here because I don’t have to worry about who’s around me and they don’t mind and I can rest, you know? God doesn’t mind if I’m resting here with Him. God wants me rested. I’m usually just so tired if I’ve stayed outside.” Not only is sleeping an activity of this small group, but it is perceived by some as one way the Living Room is spiritual.19 Jason does not sleep in order to escape people or pressures in the meeting or because he is bored by it. He sleeps because of the way his homeless life is ordered and because of the community here—

19 This has biblical foundations. In the Old Testament, Sabbath resting is a spiritual practice imitating God (Gen. 2.1-4) and reminding Israel that they are no longer slaves to Egypt (Ex. 20.8-11). Sleep is called “sweet” in Prov. 3.24 and in the Psalms, a Song of Ascent says those beloved by God will sleep well and being sleep deprived is not helpful (Ps. 127.2). Sleep can be a place to form good intentions and thoughts and to encounter the divine in dreams, such as in Jacob’s dream in Gen. 28.10-19 as well as Joseph’s dreams in Gen. 37.1-10 and Gen.40-41. However, in the New Testament gospels, sleeplessness can indicate a person’s degree of faith and is often seen as a good (so, Jesus’s parable of the Ten Virgins in Matt.25.1-13 or the disciples sleeping at Gethsemane (Luke 22.39-46 and Mk. 14.32-42.) The desert fathers have sayings about the role of sleep in the spiritual life, which I will allude to shortly.
another way the Living Room has what Don calls its “unworldly” approach in this kind of support. In sleeping, Jason is totally vulnerable and is able to sleep because he understands that he is in the presence of God and those he trusts. He does not have to pretend to be awake but can show the obvious signs of sleep in a loss of control of body parts—head slumped forward or resting on the person next to him, sometimes an occasional snore.

When John sees Jason is settling in for a nap at the beginning of meetings, he will announce to the group, “It’s okay to nap, we’re all family here.” John lets newcomers and regulars know that in community, this activity is acceptable. As a Living Room, it then is promoting live-able things humans need to do in order to survive. John also teases Jason in a good-natured way about his regular sleeping, whether it’s inviting him to speak by loudly saying, “And now, coming up out of his deep sleep…” or “He’s had his beauty rest, can’t you see the glow?” In her interview with me, Madge brought up the support group’s occurrence of sleeping, namely with Jason:

even if you just want to sleep cause you’re a camper, that’s okay, it’s a safe place. Snore, we’ll talk a little louder…Somebody sitting there even asleep has got a problem but he’s grateful to be there and will be looking forward to it as much as the person who stays awake. Like my boy Jason—when he sees me, he knows he’s gonna get a hug and a cigarette and a shoulder to lay his head on. And that’s okay he be resting cause he’s a camper. The important thing is when he do wake up, we ask him if he has anything to share and I’ll be lookin’ forward to it.

It makes sense that Madge is particularly sensitive to and gentle with Jason in this situation after her own experience at church where she was shunned for sleeping. Her response echoes a Desert Father saying that encourages Christians to practice gentleness and compassion found in this Living Room activity:
Some old men went to Abba Poeman and asked, ‘If we see brothers sleeping during the common prayer, should we wake them?’ Abba Poeman said, ‘If I see my brother sleeping, I put his head on my knees and let him rest.’ Then one man spoke up, ‘And how do you explain yourself before God?’ ‘I say to God: You have said, 'First take the beam out of your own eye and then you will be able to remove the splinter from the eye of your brother.’

“I can vent here”: Lamenting

Sandy, a young white woman from Ohio, breaks down because all she owns in one bag has been stolen from the Mission. She has no other clothes than what is on her back, no money, and no job. She desperately misses her two children now in foster care and feels despair that she will never get them back. She says she wants to die. Madge, a group leader, shares that she in the middle of a divorce that is leaving her homeless again. She also has discovered she has lung cancer and will be going into surgery soon. She worries she is “bringing down the group percolating with joy” but Don reassures her, “You wouldn’t be real if you were always in a high place.” Robert, a soft-spoken middle-aged African American comes to the Living Room off and on to share how his health is faring with his bone cancer. He has been told it is terminal. He says he has no other place to go to talk about his dying. Sometimes he wonders aloud why he has this disease, and cannot comprehend it—he never smoked and it does not run in his family. Other times he talk about the pain and the weariness he feels. John tells him, as he tells

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20 Benedicta Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection* (Collegeville: Buena Prensa of Liturgical Press, 2006), 179-180. The early Christian desert fathers in Egypt attributed different valences to sleep. Some of their sayings reveal their view of sleep as an impediment to praying unceasingly and attaining purity of heart that came through ascetic practices, like vigils. Others, like this saying, show a higher view of sleep and reveal that not all desert fathers thought sleep interfered with or distracted one from focusing on God.
others who voice loss, “Glad you’re here, we’ll absorb your pain. Pain shared, pain lessened.”

If one aspect of the human condition is the capacity to grieve about loss, then the Living Room offers homeless persons a place where, as they disclose their lives, they can be more fully human in expressing themselves through lament toward the group and God. Lamenting is a practice that appears throughout the Bible, be it in books such as Psalms and Lamentations, or with persons from grieving parents (such as Jacob or King David) and prophets (such as Jeremiah) to innocent sufferers (such as Job) and the Son of God—all cry out for personal losses or social injustices. While lament is particularly located in the Judeo-Christian faith as cries to the God of Israel, it has generated and is deeply connected to a broader human practice of crying out. \(^{21}\) Laments are particular to an individual’s or community’s suffering, as with ancient Israel’s exiles, but they are also universal because every society and person knows something of loss and displacement and the desire to voice grief and protest.

Brother D understands lament to be one of the “spiritual” things that the Living Room provides. A large African-American man with a gift for writing and singing, Brother D is a single 46-year-old and father and grandfather. A native Nashvillian, he was incarcerated after high school for dealing drugs and has had family who have been homeless. John invited him to the Living Room about a year ago in hopes that he might

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become a group leader as older leaders like Don and Doris retire. Brother D says of the Living Room,

It’s here for the homeless who may feel like they are going through madness. I’ve never been homeless, but I understand what it is to be lost, isolated, and struggle. I understand what it is to feel under attack by the police. We try to help people here not be victims. Even if you can’t get a home, the Living Room is a place you can vent and express your frustrations and in life often what we need is an opportunity to express ourselves, to let it go, to give it away to God. The vibe here is loving and spiritual. I mean, by spiritual, people here can just give it up to Him and let Him handle it. The beauty of it is it is a place for openness and growth and it can touch lives just by letting people express themselves.

That the Living Room gives room for homeless persons to “vent” is one feature the homeless perceived in setting it apart from the other two homeless social worlds at DPC. Living Room participants repeatedly said in interviews that getting to “vent” and being “real” were reasons they came. I heard this to mean they had a place where they could work through crises and pain in an emotionally honest way. Many homeless participants have lost significant aspects of their identity and personal security. The homeless fall not just into a social underclass but also a grieving underclass. Pastoral theologians and therapists and psychologists have called this “disenfranchised grief” where people have incurred loss that cannot be or is not openly acknowledged and socially and publicly supported.22 For displaced persons, the right to grieve—a basic

human dignity—and the opportunities for grieving a variety of losses and making meaning from them are denied if they have no place to lament.

Madge said in agreement with Brother D’s above assessment of the Living Room: “We don’t care if what they share is bad. Sure, it’s really wonderful when you get just all good news, but that’s all fairytale. God is in the listening here and we take it all to God.” Drawing on her African-American religious tradition, Madge calls this Living Room activity, “testifying to our trials and tribulations.” Staying in the fairytale good news is one critique Wuthnow has of support group spirituality in his study. He finds that most support groups show patterns of sharing stories that end happily and avoiding knowing the sacred through struggle and hardship. Wuthnow is concerned that small groups have only a superficial understanding of community and the sacred because their tendency to share only the good stories that make us feel better may prevent people from delving more deeply into their relationships as well as the nature of the sacred.23 However, the Living Room is one small group where sadness is shared and God and community are found in that lamenting.

Sometimes lamenting in the Living Room takes the low-level form of what Sample calls griping and complaining.24 Sample argues that griping, while often negatively construed as gossiping with zero constructive value, can be a healthy response of hard living people to hard times because it can sharpen their focus on injustices, give helpful information, or correct misinformation. Complaining about living at the Mission

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23 Wuthnow, Sharing the Journey, 313.
illustrates this. Gripes about the Mission often happened in Living Room meetings as well as immediately beforehand when people begin to drift in and take seats. These complaints seem to have value because through them, the homeless could find out about other safer places to sleep outside free of citations, like the church yard on 7th Street, or they could discover another person staying at the Mission with whom they could “run.” Moaning about far-away bus lines has led to discovering nearer ones or that the Campus for Human Development hands out bus passes to those going on job searches or doctor appointments. Gripping occasionally has led to more organized protest, such as when a few women’s complaints about the inadequate numbers of beds for women at the Campus paved the way to a community organizer working with them and the Campus administrators to increase the bed numbers.

As Anita said, “The bible says a closed mouth doesn’t get fed. We need the Living Room cause we need to talk, to say ‘I’m hungry and here’s what I’m hungry for.’” Although the bible does not, in fact, say this, Anita think it does, and so scripture is authorizing needy persons to voice their hungers. Gripping can be the first step in getting what a homeless person needs to survive. For Anita, airing grievances becomes an act of faith and that the Living Room is a faithful place in affording her this opportunity.

Gary is one Living Room regular whose participation often takes the form of lament about his health and poverty. Gary’s laments over time have shifted in their form. At first, Gary closed his complaints with a statement of determination to survive.25 For

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25 Gary’s laments first took the form found in the Old Testament. Drawing on Claus Westermann’s form critical analysis of the psalms, Brueggemann explains that Israel’s
instance, one of Gary’s early laments protested the hospital care he got on his amputated leg. Gary complained about their harm in refusing to give him a better fitting leg and to treat him with narcotics. He said they assumed he would abuse the pain killers because he was homeless. Still, he closed his sharing with “gotta keep pressing on, I ain’t giving up even with the gout, the arthritis, and the acid reflux, God willing, I’m pressing on.”

Gary’s complaints began omitting the move to confidence in God and a better future. On one occasion, Gary shared that he did not like himself right now and life was a struggle. He was in pain with his leg. The hospital had to drain it because he had overused it standing on it all day selling The Contributor. He was on crutches again. He had been drinking and cussing and not going to church and did not think he was in a good place. He told what kinds of things were happening to him—how he was robbed in a park one night on the way to the liquor store, how he was losing his friends because he was so mean now. Losing his leg had changed him and made him angrier and more withdrawn: “I’m so mad at the world. My mantra now is, ‘I will hurt you.’ I’m not good company and am staying in more.” To make matters worse, he heard that rent was increasing in his new low-income housing and he did not know how he could afford to keep it. He ended by saying that he felt like giving up. John, another participant, looked at Gary, closed his eyes and began to moan. Then he stood up and his moaning was punctuated by song: “Tell me how long will it be, before the children, before they shall

lament form is meaningful for containing grief and typically moves the lamenter from plea and complaint to a place of expectation and trust in God. This form articulates and limits the experience of loss so it can be received and coped with by the lamenter and community. Brueggemann, The Psalms, 86, 95-7, 99-100.
be set free, I’m tired of being lied on, being broke, want to be strong, how long will it be?”

Gary’s lament elicited caring responses from the leaders and other participants, but John’s stood out for singing a lament in turn. His first and last question of “how long” echoes Psalm 44 that the ancient Israelites sang in wondering about the length of exile. John’s song also stood out because of his moans. John grew up in and still attends Jefferson Street Baptist Church, an African-American church about 5 miles from DPC in a historically black neighborhood with a rich heritage in music and the Civil Rights movement. As a child, John sang in its choir. He considers singing an important expression of his faith (which I will return to in the next chapter). According to Barbara Holmes, African-American ethicist, moaning is a contemplative practice in the Black Church. Black worship services often have both orchestrated and spontaneous outcries of “Oh oh oh oh Jesus” that Holmes likens to God’s spirit moaning over creation: “the moan is the birth sound, the first movement toward a creative response to oppression, the entry into the heart of contemplation through the crucible of crisis.”

The moan heard in African American worship has its rhythmic roots in the “rock and sway” of the Middle Passage as well as slave auction laments. In the Living Room, John draws on his own

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26 Holmes works to broaden the definition of contemplation, whereby humans freely decide how to enter into the divine presence. She argues for moaning as a contemplative practice if contemplation is also construed as “a displacement of the ordinary that becomes a temporary refuge when human suffering reaches the extent of spiritual and psychic dissolution.” Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practice of the Black Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 71-75.

27 African American preacher and historian James Noel analyzes the Black worship experience as comprised of the moan and the shout, both in a dialectical relationship of
personal spiritual practice of singing, one in which he was churched, as well as, potentially, the moan coming out if his cultural memory and faith tradition, to show Gary he hears his lament and mirrors it back and joins him in it. As people used the Living Room as a place to vent through lamenting and griping, sometimes others responded not with song and moans but hopeful milestones and proverbs of wisdom.

“Thank you for the Living Room, making a way out of no way”: Hoping

The Living Room is also experienced as a faithful place because people are given the opportunity there to find hope. Take how participants explain what the Living Room is to newcomers at two meetings: “We come here to get good news,” says Phyllis. “If you take the time to listen, it teaches us not to give up, to have confidence and be motivated to seek out help,” explains Barry, a 40-year-old African American who has been attending for a couple of years. John adds, “You can come here and it gives you a lift. It’s a shot of the Spirit. Gotta have my shot here. I have it here and then I take it out to the street cause it’s not mine to keep. The Living Room gives me an extra something in my mind, something I can think about that can keep me up instead of going down.”

If Living Room leaders identified community as one goal or teaching of the homeless support group, then hope was identified as the other. Judy, one leader, says that community and hope work together because hope is found in the community’s support:

memory and hope also present in other African American cultural expressions. The moan became the “first vocalization of a new spiritual vocabulary—terrible and wonderful, it was a cry, a critique, a prayer, a hymn, a sermon all at once…It expressed loneliness, pain, and inchoate hope which later fused with biblical imagery.” Noel, Black Religion and Imagination of Matter in the Atlantic World (New York: Palgrave Press, 2009), 152.

28 Holmes, Joy Unspeakable, 78.
“just to listen and be a conduit to services that might be available, a shoulder, a hand to hold and say there’s hope for tomorrow—you’re not totally alone, come back and see us next week.”

Christian philosophers and theologians alike have said hope is at the root of spiritual experience. Pastoral theologian Andrew Lester defines hope as “the configuration of cognitive and affective responses to life that believes the future is filled with possibilities and offers blessing.” Drawing on Marcel’s philosophical work on hope, Lester describes hope found in the Christian tradition as transfinite. By that he means an ultimate hope giving us the confidence that working toward our finite hopes has meaning while also transcending the specific things to which we are attached. Transfinite hope moves us to what Marcel calls “the Beyond” and to greater issues such as freedom and deliverance.

Significant for this project, Lester says hope is basic to the human condition and is rooted in our temporality and capacity to tell stories, by which we interpret temporal experiences and develop a sense of self. As we anticipate the future, experiences of


31 Lester says our temporality is both a mark of our finitude and a gift that gives us the capacity to anticipate and want the future. In storytelling, we project ourselves into the future and our “not yet” selves. These future stories contribute to the hoping process. Lester, *Hope*, 4-7.
brokenness in past and present circumstances can create problems in our telling our future stories with trust in possibilities. Despair can set in and threaten the hoping process by distorting our future stories and selves. Hoping is a Living Room practice which allows homeless participants to feel more fully human as God’s Beloved and less out of place. As they share their past and present stories and imagine the future, they are invited to anticipate their futures bringing blessings that often entail having a place, be it a literal home, work, or social connections.

Leaders and participants say they experience hope when the support group celebrates milestones of those who return to show how their lives have changed. One leader Doris recalls a few meetings where people were deep in despair, wondering aloud why they attended the Living Room since things never change, and the difference made when someone would walk in after a long absence to say that things do change here: “To hear people say they came in with no hope and that this group helped them get on their feet and change their lives, it’s unexplainable. We’ve seen a lot of homeless going forward and then falling back but we’ve also seen miracles.” When people return with good news, others like Danny say they encounter God in the Living Room: “I feel close to God when I can hear their stories. I see how they do better and I know God will help me, too.”

Tim, a 52-year-old white man from Louisiana, has returned to share joys on a few occasions. He is getting help for his mental illness and is ten months clean after rehab. He proudly shares that despite his seven felonies he has gotten a job as a greeter at Walmart and was accepted into low-income public housing. He tells how he good he felt
after earning his first paycheck. He reflects some on his childhood and his abusive dad who put him down and told him he would only amount to a bum, and how good it feels to say, “No, I’m more than a bum.” Tim credited God with his newfound non-homeless identity and feelings of dignity and security: “God does for me what I can’t do for me. Things are going forward not backward. I was like a rat, stuck, spinning in the homeless maze but now I can walk down the street and wave at the police and not worry about going to jail. I can buy my own bus pass instead of having to ask everyone for everything.” People clap and smile while Tim looks around the Living Room and says, “This right here is how God first started to deliver me. Let’s not give up!”

Hearing of someone’s success gives hope because in sharing that information, someone else may gain a new connection for finding a job or housing. This is often attributed to God’s work in and through the group. For example, when Kim celebrates going through Goodwill’s job training and getting a position there, Reggie, a middle aged African American man from Philadelphia who was feeling down, told Kim: “You put a good feeling in me. You told me about Goodwill’s job training that will work with past felons. You told me the bus to get there. It’s the first place I’m going to go after I leave here.” Interestingly, Kim had just shared how she had been wrestling with feeling unable to sense God in her life. Reggie looked at her and said that God was present and working in the room through Kim and others: “You are in this room. God’s working through us, you. He’s here giving this feedback.” John and Doris added, “God’s not gonna come in all his glory but he’s sent us and you’ve been a part of that.” In this way, the Living
Room with its celebrations of milestones seems to be a sacramental place, where persons participate in God’s invisible presence made visible in one another in the support group.

Toni was a long time Living Room participant who spent almost 20 years on the streets and in substance abuse. A white 51-year-old woman, she is now clean, working, and has a home. She is in touch with her family and when she returns to the Living Room to share good news and encourage people, she likes to bring her daughter to come see where she credits her new life. In one meeting, Toni was listening to Kim express impatience with staying at the Mission. She told Kim how much she reminded her of herself and then said,

Each of us has a story. I was a junky and when I shower I see my scars on my arms daily. I thank God because it makes me remember where I came from…You might be in a down time where you can’t see the full picture but we’re being shaped and molded into a masterpiece. You are a masterpiece in the making. Lord, he knows each of our stories, crud, chaos, the hell, its shaping us. Wait it out. God will use it for good to be part of a beautiful picture later that He already has in mind…I’m sure you’ve got a beautiful story to tell and you’re in the process of living it, too.

Finally, Anita, affectionately called the Pied Piper by some leaders, is another formerly homeless person who has, what she calls “homecomings” at the Living Room as a way “to instill hope in others.” While I never observed this, Anita does notice that sharing her good news does not always feel welcomed, but she shrugs off any perceived negativity as a bad spirit: “I don’t come short but if someone looks at me like ‘shut her ass up’—for real!—I embrace it. Cause a lot of times we hinder our blessing when we have malice for the next persons or we have a bad spirit, against someone else.” Invoking the story of Cain and Abel to make her own ethic of hope, Anita continues to
explain to me that the importance of people celebrating another in the Living Room and not falling into envy:

If I am down and want some of my own accomplishments, I rise up through celebrating with you. I need to feel good about your victories to hope for and maybe eventually celebrate mine. Thing is, think about this saying, “Am I my brothers’ keeper?” Yeah, I am. Yeah, I need to celebrate your success. We get it twisted and we start thinking, ‘they going to get the big head’ or ‘here they go again,’ but whatever they got, you can have too—why should I envy you when you are bringing me to that place?”

Besides honoring milestones, a second way hope is practiced in the Living Room is in the mode of proverbs, a feature of an oral culture. The oral culture on display at the Living Room seems to come from three different but sometimes overlapping contexts of the homeless and formerly homeless participants: the blue collar working class, African Americans, and those involved in 12 Step programs. Proverbs, according to Tex

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32 Proverbs are a significant feature in the talk of each of these cultural contexts. For the oral culture and proverbs spoken by blue collar and hard living people, see Sample, *Ministry in an Oral Culture*, 3-10.

33 For proverbs in the oral culture of African Americans, see for its use to educate and form children in womanist spiritual values and moral wisdom, Teresa Fry Brown, *God Don’t Like Ugly: African American Women Handing on Spiritual Values* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 52-3. Geneva Smitherman traces the use of proverbs to African and Caribbean roots and studies black speak in Detroit and Pittsburgh. She has noted a special fondness for indirection and metaphoric speech by African Americans. See Smitherman, Jack Daniel, and Milford Jeremiah, “‘Making A Way Outa No Way’: The Proverb Tradition in the Black Experience,” *Journal of Black Studies* 17, no.4 (1987): 482-508. Like Smitherman, Anand Prahlad frames his project on proverbs with socio-cultural theory to see them as speech acts or shared social performances used by people who must know when, how, and for whom to use them. He looks at the historical and social factors central to African American lives that influenced their making and use of proverbs. See Prahlad, *African American Proverbs in Context* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996). Proverbs have played in a role in the sermons and pastoral care in the Black church, and I will soon address this with a Living Room leader John and his use of them.

34 For proverbs in the 12 Step context and how they function as slogans with instructional messages of abstinence and socialization for and persuasion to stay in the program as
Sample are “keys for bunching up experience” particularly hard experience. Arising out of everyday life, proverbs are accessible to all social groups regardless of education and skill. If oral people tend to think in stories and sayings, it is not surprising then that adages often were a part of the Living Room conversation.

Living Room participants report generally liking proverbial sayings and see them as something that keeps their faith strong. For example, Deb says that while she does not really read the bible, she does turn to the “psychology pamphlets” from A Room in the Inn because of their sayings. She reads the sayings for comfort and sends them to her boyfriend in prison to help keep his faith strong. Her favorite, “If life throws you curve balls, hit them,” is one she likes to keep in her mind to give her strength to push through her wait for housing.

Proverbs are one way the group leader John likes to teach hope and offer care at the Living Room. Proverbs are an important part of the wisdom tradition for pastoral care and leadership in the Christian tradition and more specifically in the African American church, so it makes sense that John, an African American man who is deeply


Sample, Ministry in an Oral Culture, 37.


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involved in church (in addition to a 12 Step program), draws on them. John understands himself as having been commissioned by God to bring and teach hope “all the time” in the Living Room. He talks about it as his ministry and God-given responsibility because, as he says, the support group was a part of his own story as a homeless person and deliverance from drug and alcohol addiction. John uses lively biblical images for his role as a hopeful support group leader from dousing people and their problems with saving water (“I’m a fireman. The hose never stops spraying. Every morning there are fires to be put out. It’s a part of my Christian walk.”) to cleaning God’s fish (“God catches them, I clean them!”) to seeing his work in the Markan story of Jesus healing the Gerasene Demoniac (Mark 5). When John is “right in the fight” with someone overcome by Legion, one way he understands the demon is someone giving up and doubting change will come.

Even outside of meetings, John delivers hopeful sayings as a part of the on-going care of Living Room participants. For example, during my interview with Barry, he received a couple of texts from John. He smiled and said how much he loved receiving these “encouraging sayings” for in the sayings and in the receiving of them, he felt close to God: “When you really have people who care for you and you can feel it—like when

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38 The way John describes himself following Jesus whom he sees as a Fixer or Healer resonates with a stream in African American spirituality that Wilmore calls “pragmatic spirituality.” John wants to emulate God’s love seen in Jesus’s earthly ministry of healing that focuses on “nitty-gritty problems” like being without a home, struggling to get clean of substance abuse, or finding help for mental illness. Diana Hayes lays out Wilmore’s and other African American spiritualities. See Hayes, *Forged in the Fiery Furnace: African American Spirituality* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2012), 168-189.
John sends us texts every day—a little saying from his heart—those are the times I can really grasp a hold of God’s love and I can resist anything, hardships or nothing. Even when you slip up, he’s there to pick you up. And I can keep the saying for myself throughout the day.” He showed me one text: “Trouble don’t last always. Hope and Help are on the way. Keep a smile on your face and a song in your heart.” These are sayings John often shares in meetings. From a womanist perspective, John is using the first proverb, one with African American roots, as testifying language to give witness to Barry that trouble is transitory and change will come in God’s own time, so overcome trouble by keeping faith in God.39

Repeatedly, participants respond to each other’s stories in meetings with short hopeful sayings. Sandy and Randy, an interracial couple in their mid twenties new to Nashville, came to the Living Room with suitcases in tow and sunburned from walking the streets. Sandy shared that they had been together nine years despite their own families not wanting them together because of race. They came to Nashville and were in need of housing and jobs. Mac, an older African American Vietnam veteran, spoke up: “Winners never quit. You’ll get there, you’ll get help. You can lean on each other. It’s always darkest before the dawn. Refuse to accept defeat. God will make a way out of no way. This is coming from an old maniac who was in Nam.” Sandy and Danny sat in silence, and I left there wondering if the old veteran’s flurry of sayings helped them or if they struck the couple as trite. When they came back the next week and I asked them why they returned, they acknowledged Mac’s words as a main reason: “they came from the

39 Fry Brown, God Don’t Like Ugly, 84.
heart. He’s been through a lot. He and the room, they were keeping it real. I just want more of that. As long as people are real and from the heart, I want to hear what they have to say, good or bad.”

When Mac spoke to Sandy and Danny and gave his life credentials including old age and war, they trusted him and felt he was being “real.” One of Mac’s sayings—“God will make a way out of no way”—has a significant place in African American culture as well as the Christian tradition.40 In fact, this latter saying is one Anita has used in the closing prayers of the Living Room and used that day with Sandy and Randy: “Thanks for this group. Give us more groups like the Living Room because it gives us a way out of no way.” Anita’s prayer shows her using a proverb of hope to name the Living Room as place for the no-placed, or “way” out of the “no way” of homelessness. Such proverbs that look toward the future can dispel or ease present frustrations for homeless participants who lean on them when in need of encouragement.

40 Actually, he uses more than one proverb with African American roots, but this one has both. The proverb “way out of no way” finds Old Testament connections to Second Isaiah’s Little Book of Comfort where Isaiah is called to tell the Babylonian exiles that God, who made a way out of the sea and wilderness will now lead them through a new exodus to bring God’s chosen home (Isaiah 43.14-24). It also finds New Testament connections since this prophecy is picked up by John the Baptist preparing the way of Jesus who is on the “way” or a journey to usher in God’s Kingdom (Mark 1-2). It was used by Martin Luther King, Jr. in his preaching about the Montgomery bus boycott as well as “A Christmas Sermon on Peace” in Atlanta 1967. It also appears in early African American literature, such as by Zora Neal Hurston, to describe Moses’ actions in her 1939 novel Man of the Mountain. More recently, President Obama has employed it in speeches. See Wolfgang Meider, Making a Way out of No Way: Martin Luther King’s Sermonic Rhetoric (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2010), 24, 181-3. According to Daniel, Jeremiah, and Smitherman, this proverb offers “the essence of the Black experience” since the African American worldview has been one of trying to cope and progress with God’s help in a difficult world. Daniel, Jeremiah, and Smitherman, “Makin’ a Way out of No Way,” 494.
The key theological norm in many of the Living Room’s celebratory moments and sayings of hope is divine providence. Classic sociologist and psychologist theories of religion have critiqued providential belief in regards to the poor. Theorists such as Karl Marx (religion is “the opium of the people”) and Sigmund Freud (religion is “like an obsessional neuroses of children”) have disparaged its otherworldly focus that encourages the poor to use religion to escape from or console themselves about their material conditions and unjust economic and social realities as they wait for their “pie in the sky” or heavenly reward.41

However, providential belief also has its benefits. It is a crucial feature of both African American spirituality and of Hard Living spirituality, and Wimberly and Sample both argue for the good of it in these two contexts.42 Providence involves hope because if human life is unfolding according to a good and all controlling God, then under God’s shape and guidance, God will get the last word and not injustice or suffering. Sample acknowledges it is easy to be suspicious of providence as a kind of narcotic, but when your life is out of control, to assert belief in a divine plan offers a last vestige of hope and leads to a sense of meaning as well as safety. Waiting, then, can be construed not as a religious act of escapism or infantile delusion but as a faithful act requiring courage to face present struggles and protest them by anticipating the future with openness to change. If Living Room participants end their sharings with, “I am still waiting” that

42 Edward Wimberly, African American Pastoral Care, 2. Sample, Hard Living, 61-66.
intones despair, John, the leader, sometimes responds with, “You mean, we are waiting *in expectation*” as an invitation to them to reframe their waiting in community and with possibility.

Belief in a divine plan at work accords respect to all human life, even present suffering that is experienced as degrading. Toni illustrates this with Kim in telling her that her “crud,” including her undignified life at the Mission, can be “waited out,” for she is already in the process of being sculpted into a beautiful masterpiece by God—and even the “crud” has a purpose in God’s larger plan and will be a part of her art. Thus, activities of hope in the Living Room, undergirded by a providential theology, not only give meaning to the waiting homeless do but they have the potential to subvert their matter out of place mentality.

Still, it is important to note that sometimes, in their desire to help others not give up, participants can make unrealistic promises that make for false hope. Take James, a white war veteran in his sixties, who shares his background and then how desperate he feels trying to find work. Dwayne, a middle aged African American man, told James that he had just gotten a contract with Tennessee State University to pressure wash parking lots and do lawn care. He promised to mention James’ name in his upcoming meeting with the university president and added, “If God opens the door for me, I’ll open one for you, too.” A university president having a meeting with a new maintenance employee struck me as far-fetched, and I wondered how James would hear this promise. When we met after the meeting, his face lit up and he said,
The Living Room gave us info about A Room in the Inn, a number for an open apartment, and now this. I’m really praying that will happen. This is what I love about the Living Room. If it’s not happening to you, it sounds so good to hear for someone else. I love that it’s happening to someone else because they are in the same boat and they are moving up. It gives you lots of hope. They can help pick me up out the gutter. This guy got help out of the hole so now he’ll turn around and help me get out of the hole…You heard him—this TSU thing. When he looked at me and said that, it brought me up a notch or two and just raised me up off the chair.

During my fieldwork observations, Dwayne did not follow up on his promise to James. One leader, Judy has noticed this problem but has concluded “I feel bad about that, but every little piece of hope they can have, if someone gives them a smile or kind word, they can build upon that, you know, even when it doesn’t come to fruition.” It is to other challenges and tensions in the Living Room that I now turn.

Challenges to the Living Room being a faithful place for the homeless

A faithful place for its homeless participants in important ways, the Living Room is not without its limitations and challenges. I have already touched upon one noticed by myself and a leader, a concern for misplaced hope. In this section, I want to explore four others: a distorted view of God that promotes passivity; the group’s inability to effect large-scale and immediate changes for poverty; power dynamics; and, gender assumptions.

Some of the Living Room leaders, notably the ones who are white and have never experienced homelessness, say a limitation to the group is in how many homeless persons envision and relate to a providential God. Don said this:

I learned in the black community that to trust God is powerful is important…so I have respect for people who trust that God has the power to do things…People in here use the language of God as the authority who is guiding them. I’m glad He is. Now, there’s a
certain truth that I can confess, too, but with that I see at times an unwillingness to engage in rowing the boat. Rowing is important. Don’t just sit or pray. You gotta row.

“Rowing,” in fact, literally is the advice Don gives to help people see this. When Richard, a 43-year-old single African American man, comes to give all praises to God for his new found sobriety, his housing in a halfway house, and his being chosen to be a house leader, Don suggested responded with, “this fellow says God is for us. But there’s another part to it. We gotta make choices and act. Those two things they go together. Gotta row in the currents.” He turned to Richard, “and that’s what you are doing.” Don invites Richard and others to claim that they have some agency and act on it.

Don also expresses concern that the predominant homeless view of God as “having control over everything” that they heard in the Living Room is “too mechanical” or what Judy calls “micromanaging.” “God the micromanager” resonates with what I heard Anita say on a couple of occasions. When I offered her a ride after one meeting, she told me God gave her the ride and saw her through because she brought Tasha to the Living Room. When we had our interview over coffee, she told me that before God put Jesus on the cross at Calvary, God knew there would be a Starbucks so that I would ask her for coffee. For Anita, God is working in and attending to every particular moment and willing it for good and this is a cause for praise and thanksgiving, whereas other leaders worry that this is “too simplistic.” But, each of the leaders who voice this concern were adamant about not fixing participants’ or other leaders’ theologies simply because they did not personally espouse them. Judy said, “Maybe it’s because I’m not in their shoes. If their view of God is that He’s out there and will come and help them
individually, so be it.” These leaders perceive “God as micomanager” as bad theology that, in their minds, can limit Living Room discussions and how the homeless understand their own agency. However, that they recognize the homeless and formerly homeless deserve to have a place to voice beliefs that grow out of their own raced and classed experiences is an act of hospitality that accords them dignity and respect which is part of what makes the Living Room a faithful place.

A second challenge I heard given by homeless persons who come to DPC for its other homeless social worlds but choose not to come to this support group. Coyote voiced it in the one suggestion for a change to be made with the Living Room: “I wish we had more practical information for the right now and not—‘if you can wait til evening or wait til the end of the month.’ I wish we could really help people now.”

Sometimes not just promises but the advice offered from the homeless participants is unrealistic. Nicole, a 40-year-old white woman, has come to the Living Room several times with her baby son, in hopes of a concrete and immediate solution to her housing needs. Nicole shared her story at one meeting. She ran away from home as a teenager because of abuse and has been chronically homeless ever since. She also struggles with alcoholism and has two years of sobriety. After Tent City flooded, she went to the Women’s Mission and then back to her mother’s, but between her mother dying of cancer and her losing a job, she wound up on the streets again, this time where she was raped. She said she found herself pregnant from the rape and kept the baby, but now she can’t find housing for them—only waiting lists. Nicole asked if anyone knew where she could find family housing and support so she could attend her recovery classes.
and work with the street paper and her two other jobs. When I heard the suggestions of
two homeless participants—a convent in Pleasant Valley, TN and the Mennonites outside
of Nashville, I looked at Nicole’s face wearing an expression of wearied despair. While
she was shown compassion and those around her truly wanted to help, Nicole was not
going to get that day from the Living Room meeting the help that she desperately was
seeking.

While Nicole has returned, some do not because they do not want to hear that they
need to be patient and wait. Augustine, a young Hispanic man from Chicago, has
attended the Living Room a couple of times. He is in a wheelchair after losing his leg to
cancer and is separated from his wife while they each stay at the Missions. When he
shared his worries about “running out of time, medicine and money and running into the
same brick wall” with work and housing, John advised that he “show patience and be
hopeful.” Augustine’s response was “I am patient. I don’t want a virtue. I want reality.
I believe in God and God’s will but God and his will don’t pay my bills.”

Like Augustine, Robin, who attends both the worship and then the street paper
meetings, has come a couple of times but has stopped. She says “it was okay, but you
know, I wanted more real help and real advice to my money and home problems.” I was
surprised to hear this because as I observed her in one meeting after sharing her anxiety
about falling into homelessness again and receiving empathetic responses, she expressed
relief and gratitude for being heard. In the moments of sharing her anxiety, the Living
Room provided support, but for Robin the discussion did nothing immediately practical
to alleviate her financial woes. This is not to say the Living Room does nothing practical
ever. One of the strengths of this group as seen by a group leader, Sam, is getting such things done due to its “lack of bureaucracy—if someone needs poles for tent, bus passes or tickets, a coat, or help getting through the month with a phone bill, we can do those things without three forms, waiting for approval, and showing proof.”

Providing occasional material aid as well as providing a place to have some community where what you say matters—these alone do not necessarily empower a homeless person enough to be able to actively undo unjust social and economic structures. These alone do not necessarily cause significant changes in Living Room participants’ material reality. Its opportunity to experience a sense of safety and care and shielding from despair may be altogether too brief. However, experiencing being seen and heard as fully human; experiencing others who wait expectantly with you in support—these over time can produce a good of endurance and so bring the possibility of change in the future. This good of endurance may be what Living Room co-founder Karl had in mind when he wanted it to be a place for the homeless to remember that their “fighting spirit was their most prized possession.” Don has wondered aloud about this limitation in relation to his long term vision for the Living Room and compares it with the Open Door in Atlanta:

The Living Room is a modest project. I wonder sometimes if it’s very significant but I think it is. It is a learning place—learning what the nature of God is, the nature of community, the nature of my life. What I can offer, even if it feels minimal, I offer it up to God and hope it does something. I could see the Living Room being done around the nation where hospitality is offered in churches and people gather. You know, the Open Door really doesn’t do much of this kind of gathering. Hospitality is a key feature of what they’re about—they do food and a foot clinic but they don’t respond to the homeless in this particular way of listening.
Besides the limitation of not creating large scale changes for the homeless in their dire socioeconomic realities, one issue I observed was in relation to power dynamics with group rules and how a leader used the word, “spiritual” to stop someone from coming on the monthly Penuel Ridge retreats, a piece of the Living Room’s ministry. The conversation went as follows:

Shawna: Isn’t the retreat tomorrow? I’m glad I’ll get to go, anyway.
John: Well, that’s a spiritual matter between me and Madge and the Holy Spirit. I need to pray on it, we need to discern. It’s a spiritual thing, see. Just because you’re here doesn’t mean that you get to go.
Shawna: Well, then why am I coming to this Living Room?
John: Well, to be honest, we pick people who are homeless, who have no income. I know you need money but you draw a check and have a place now.
Shawna: But I have been homeless and I still need money and to get away.
John: Look, that’s really the truth. I didn’t know how to say it to you.
Shawna: So I can or can’t go? What are you saying?

Shawna, a middle-aged white woman who has gotten low-income housing, was coming to a meeting to inquire about the next retreat. This isn’t unusual for participants to check in on the retreat schedule because they don’t want to miss a day of rest with a shower and good food outside of the city. The rule at the Living Room in relation to retreats is this: When you attend the Living Room the day before a retreat, you have the first option of going. Attending the day before a retreat is essentially your ticket to get into it if you get yourself to the van that comes at 8 am to the Missions and the Campus for Human Development. Shawna knows how this rule works and has made a pattern out of only coming to meetings right before a retreat. In a rather clever move, she has figured out how to work the system to her advantage and shows up only when she can get what she
really wants—not participating in the community by sharing and listening to others but simply securing a spot at Penuel Ridge.

Recognizing this, John does not want Shawna to attend the retreat. John wants to tell her she cannot attend it because that only encourages others to attend the Living Room once a month rather than committing to its community of care. He responds to Shawna by telling her the opposite of the rule, and he couches it with “spiritual” language: “That’s a spiritual matter…I need to pray on it…it’s a spiritual thing.” This sends a message to Shawna and the group that the leaders have the final authority to trump the rule and decide who attends. Further, what they decide is sanctioned by God because deciding these matters is a prayerful, “spiritual” thing where they “discern” who goes by listening to God.

Shawna does not fade gently into that good night. In a fashion reminiscent of the Syro-Phoenician woman with Jesus in Mark 8, she questions John on the rule and reminds him that while she may not be homeless today, she is has been homeless and continues to have great need, too. To his credit, John admits to Shawna in front of the group that he was not entirely honest in his initial response, she is right about the rule, but there are exceptions that he and Madge get to “pick.” Of course, for John, God is in the picking as God is in everything—guiding John and shaping his life according to his plan. To be fair, John seems to recognize the problem and tried to fix it; still, the moment shows how one homeless woman ensures having her place at the retreat by working the Living Room rules and how a leader can misuse and fall back on “spiritual” language to
justify his authority to make decisions effecting which homeless get to have a place at the retreat.

If power dynamics emerge as a potential challenge to the Living Room’s becoming a faithful place for the homeless, gendered social dynamics do as well. Feeling one’s self to be more than matter out of place in the Living Room does not necessarily help women and men to see how their experiences in the support group are shaped by gendered social dynamics, which may either strengthen or suppress their sense of agency as well as how they think they can be in relationship with the divine.

When a twenty-year-old African American female participant, Kim voices her own issues at one meeting, John uses masculine language for how she can find her connection to God’s Spirit:

Kim: I feel discouraged. Why do I always listen to the wrong people?
John: We tend to want to listen to the bad guy, but if you continue to listen, God will give you a discerning spirit to know the truth, a spirit where you can hear your inner man.
Kim: Thanks. They all start off nice, it’s so hard to tell. I’ll be praying for it.

Kim wants advice on how to better choose where she seeks counsel, and John tells her to listen first to God whose spirit will lead her to discern well. But, for John, God’s spirit seems to either be equated with an “inner man” or connects a person, regardless of gender, to “his inner man.” John does not tell Kim to listen to her “own self” or her “inner woman.” What Kim learns and does not pause to question, as does no one else in the meeting, is that her interior voice that helps her figure out good and bad, connects her to God, and can lead her to truth is masculine. In order for her to reach her best self

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given by God, that best self will have to take on a totally different gender from Kim. If God’s spirit resides in Kim, she learns in the Living Room that it is as a man.

Gender issues also emerge with the advice John gives Kim and another newcomer, Bridget. At one meeting, Kim asked why it was so hard to get housing and worried about her lengthy stay at the Women’s Mission, and she received this feedback:

Madge: The mission is a great push off, a roof, meals, start putting some money back. You’re very smart, Kim. You may want to work at Goodwill and then start your own business and invest in yourself. You deserve it all.
Jim (a middle aged homeless African American): Ever thought about the Navy or Air Force as a way to make a living and maybe go to school?
John: You’ll get a husband. You’re in the process of the solution. You’ll get married.

Unlike Madge and Jim whose responses teach Kim that she has different options and can take the initiative for caring for herself, John’s response suggests to her that in order to get secure housing, she needs a husband on whom to depend. In my fieldwork observations, when men shared concern about finding secure housing and work, I never heard them told, “You’ll get a wife.”

Bridget is a white woman in her early 20’s, who spent her second meeting sobbing about a break-up with her recent boyfriend whom she had followed to Nashville. She was now in a new city, with no work or money, and staying at the Mission. Bridget shared how alone and scared she felt. In response, John asked Bridget to go to a place of giving. From John’s perspective, sacrifice, service, humility—these are all spiritual disciplines that can deepen any Christian’s faith and bring redemption. Without taking into account how much Bridget had already given to her former boyfriend, John heard her problem as one where she was too wrapped up in feeling sorry for herself. He told
her she needed to be taken out of herself and move to a “humble place” and think of others, “to sacrifice for and serve” others. Another leader, Doris, suggested that Bridget had already sacrificed enough and that would not work here as a solution. Bridget agreed that giving was not her problem because she already gives so much, like she did with her boyfriend, and she wanted to find a balance. Then, Deb spoke up. Deb is a 53-year-old white woman who lost her work as a RN and for over a year had been staying at various places—the Campus for Human Development, the Mission, tenting outdoors—while waiting for a low-income apartment. Deb pulled out a poem she had been holding on to for sharing at the right time in the Living Room and she felt it spoke to Bridget. The poem described how a person begins to love herself when she learns to respect herself and free herself of people and situations drawing her down. Don chimed in and told Bridget that even when she does not feel affirmed by her boyfriend and others, the Living Room wants to affirm the life and respect in her. John admitted realizing his mistaken response to Bridget and shared how grateful he was for other leaders like Doris and Don to help him learn to better listen the next time.

Even though all Living Room participants and leaders reported no tensions or concerns in how women or men were treated in conversations, I did observe these two noteworthy moments with Kim and Bridget in the group meetings where gendered social dynamics appeared. They seem to have the potential to discourage the agency of young homeless women participants to secure their own futures as illustrated in John’s “Find a husband” comment to Kim or to teach them that their giving even unto the point of suffering is a redemptive good as shown in John’s “Your suffering is a good” comment to
Bridget that Doris and Debbie both corrected. The ways that the Living Room leaders, like John, listen to homeless men and women and decide how to encourage them to endure and break free of extreme poverty is influenced by their assumptions of what it means to be a man or a woman. Listening can be redemptive in the Living Room, but not when our capacity to listen is distorted by assumptions about gender or assumptions about the spiritual life that take no account of gender. Perhaps, the most faithful moments here were when Madge and John invited Kim to consider her future where she could take care of herself, or when Doris and Debbie spoke up and offered another perspective with Bridget and so made room not only for Bridget to voice her truth but for John to learn how to better listen to a woman.

As one of three homeless social worlds at DPC, the Living Room becomes a faithful or spiritual place through six activities and practices, some of which reflect its oral/traditional culture: storytelling and empathy; sleeping; lamenting; and hoping mostly done through celebrations and proverbial sayings. These activities work to create community as well as a safe place where the homeless and formerly homeless can experience being fully human and encounter God. For some participants, the Living Room even replaces or becomes an alternative to church where they do not receive hospitality and experience full membership. Even with its limitations and challenges perceived by leaders, participants, and myself, this chapter has shown how informal conversations can become a site of lived religion for the homeless. In my next chapter, I will look at the Wednesday worship service as a place for the homeless to practice their faith.
Chapter 4

The DPC Wednesday Worship Service for the Homeless

This chapter explores the Wednesday worship service, the first homeless social world that emerged at the place of DPC. Wednesday homeless worship includes familiar elements of gathering, prayer and proclamation, but how the gathering is structured and what is proclaimed very much is shaped by a context of homelessness. Listening to the reasons for why the homeless attend this service and how they experience it revealed to me complicated understandings of and motives for worship. The proclamation of scripture to the homeless meant to bring good news for those treated as “matter out of place” and empower them to follow Christ even in the midst of their homelessness. It did so for some while others rejected this invitation to agency as too great a risk to trust and be in relationship or could not hear the message because they identified instead with those in need. As the good news of the inscriptive tradition was shared, an incorporative tradition was also being proclaimed at the bodily level. The church provided a space where many who found a safe dwelling and felt peace in their bodies habituated to a hard life also admitted to feeling a heightened wariness and “on guard.” I saw incorporative traditioning also at work in the church’s temporal and spatial disciplinary power to produce mannerly and “docile” (so, Foucault) homeless bodies perceived as dangerous and in need of civilizing. In fact, disciplinary power, at times shaming, even seemed to be on display in the worship service. Overall, I found the Wednesday worship service full of ambiguity in its faithfulness to proclaim good news to the homeless and give them
a place to appear as more than “matter out of place” and to practice a redemptive spirituality.

As I explore why the homeless come to the Wednesday worship and how they understand what they are doing there, I will preface this by noting that in interviews, no one spoke of coming to chapel (see figure 4.1) simply for worship in and of itself. It was as if worship was added on to their time here on Wednesdays—in fact, some described it as an “extra” or “bonus” thing. When I asked why they came to worship, despite the varied responses, two reasons were mentioned by all the subjects. Everyone said they were already coming to DPC because of the lunch in Fellowship Hall (see figure 4.2) or the street paper release. Save one person, all said that they wanted to flee the waiting line outside. They clarified that they were not trying to get to the food any faster but they wanted to escape the outdoors, the perceived stigma with the “drama” of the line, or the tedious and degrading experience of waiting itself.

Figure 4.1 Chapel     Figure 4.2 Fellowship Hall
Coming to the Wednesday chapel service for primary reasons other than worship did not mean it was not a site of lived faith or being close to God, though. Simply listening to a sermon or “getting the Word” was understood by a few as a source of strength. Judy, a 54-year-old African American woman, called the opportunity to hear the Word before lunch a “blessing” that “kept [her] strong” after she got evicted from her housing when her husband left her and her teenage son. Troy, a 49-year-old white man who says he lost a business and close to a six figure salary for family health care reasons, said that he needs lunch but he also needs to hear the Word: “When I feel hopeless, I get some sense of faith to hold on to from these messages. It balances out the despair I feel. It’s a short message, but it’s a powerful message—more than other places that go on and on—that gives me strength.” Coming and listening to the message also could be an expression of faith and an opportunity for reciprocation and practicing gratitude. For instance, Larry, a 59-year-old African American, thinks “the food tastes better when I hear the Word first because I can show the church people I’m grateful for the food they feed me. It’s what I can do if they are giving me a meal.” Larry understands the worship service as a place where he can show his thanks to the church for their care of him—he may not be able to pay for his meal, but he can offer them gratitude and reciprocate by attending the service and hearing a sermon that they provide.

Of course, some participate in worship without any desire to be there in order live out their faith. Alfonzo, a 47-year-old African American man, has been coming for over six months and tunes out the sermon and prayer: “I don’t really think about his message. My mind goes somewhere else. Like I think about my problems with high blood pressure.
and needing a check up. It’s a safe space for that, so it’s helpful for me, not spiritually—I’d be lying—but just a place to come eat and think.” When Alfonzo began his interview with me, he was very excited to share with me what he said many homeless felt but few would ever really share: “It’s just a routine. Not sure very many would go here if they didn’t serve the food. I hear the preacher here say, ‘who loves God?’ and everyone raises their hands and ‘amens.’ I know how to go along with the flow but I hate to play it.” He perceives the DPC worship service to be a performance—not as some theologians call worship a performance of the Christian story in response to God\(^1\), but a performance where he (and he thinks other homeless) display the appropriate gestures and attitudes in order to continue receiving the help they need.

Alfonzo said learning to “play” at worship came early for him when he attended Pentecostal churches in Atlanta. At first, speaking in tongues, healings, and being slain by the Spirit were ways he felt close to God, but he came to see them as expected performances done on cue not to help the person being healed but to underwrite the pastor’s authority:

When I first joined the church, I felt closer to God. I thought we tore it up for the Holy Ghost—you know, got to get on your knees, a lot of slobbering, a lot of waiting for Jesus to speak in tongues. Most of my life churches have required that you jump up, turn flips, crawl. But what was it doing for me or people with real problems, you know? And, you must be evil if you can’t jump, if you don’t play along with the flow. I was expected to play along with the preacher’s power coming from God but it really is all about making him look good and look like he has the power.

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Alfonzo continues to explain how his being in this Wednesday worship has no religious meaning for him, yet he comes because he feels he has no other choice as a homeless person: “Ain’t been trying to seek out God. Church is just made a part of the homeless life. It’s a routine, it don’t matter either way. It’s just a part of being homeless. I think a lot of the praying and amening of the homeless is just routine. I’m not in contact with God, but being homeless, you can’t escape church and God.” Alfonzo echoed what one volunteer with the homeless at the Living Room Penuel Ridge retreats told me: “All the amens you hear in a chapel service for the homeless, that’s bullshit. That is them working the system.” Alfonzo shows how the homeless label may force persons labeled as homeless to behave in ways defined by the label. That is, Alfonzo comes here because most homeless in Nashville rely on downtown churches for feedings. He has adapted his daily routines (and perhaps life path) to match service routines of churches for food. When I pointed out that DPC pastor Ken Locke begins nearly every worship service by reminding the homeless that worship is never required for eating at DPC—unlike the way the Mission requires chapel attendance for shelter—Alfonzo disagreed. He said he must come because going to church is a given part of homeless life and acting out one’s part in the service is perhaps another form of reciprocation, of giving back what he assumes the pastor wants so that he can continue having a safe place to think and be quiet before a meal.

Listening to Alfonzo, I think of a few people I had asked upon leaving the chapel what they thought of the service. Responses included some rather indifferent and hurriedly spoken, “Yeah, yeah, I was with Christ” or “Yeah, I learned something about
Jesus.” I heard in those brush-offs something of “Please leave me alone and let me get to what really matters: the food.” For people whose main goal is oriented to present survival, I do not mean this observation judgmentally but to note that if non-homeless worship services often entail some gathering afterwards with the minister or others to strengthen social bonds, such gathering is a rarity here. Still, Alfonzo’s response struck me as somewhat cynical and perhaps too quick in generalizing since, if I take others (both their responsiveness in the services and their interviews) at face value, people do come in part to hear God’s Word and be in God’s presence. Although Alfonzo sees himself and others as faking religious sentiments, he does express appreciation for DPC providing a place where he can escape from a judgmental religious orientation at the Mission: “At least in coming here, the pastor doesn’t try to make me believe. At the Mission, well, I mean, how many times a week in chapel does it take you to get saved?”

In fact, as Alfonzo notes, one common reason for coming was homiletic escape from the Mission. Rick, a 53-year-old white man who is Jewish, says he comes here to eat but he teasingly added he “likes to put up with goyim sermons” because unlike the Mission, “Ken doesn’t bad mouth Jews.” Rick elaborated, “Ken isn’t anti-Semitic. Even like he said today about the woman touching Jesus’s prayer shawl—cause it was a Jewish prayer shawl. Even the goy preacher can say some Christian stuff that is true for me and he will preach on the Old Testament and not say how it’s all wrong and old law and stuff.” Rick continues to describe staying “in the Christian Mission” and being thrown out more than once for challenging guest preachers in chapel: “They would say something bad about us Jews like, ‘the Jews murdered our Lord Jesus Christ’ and I said,
‘What the hell did you just say? No, the Romans killed him.’ And, here comes the head honcho of the Mission giving me three days out. But you know, I didn’t feel spiritually safe there anyway.”

Phyllis and James, a white couple in their early fifties who also attend the Living Room, explain that they come because unlike the Missions and the Baptist churches they grew up attending, the message at DPC is not harping on eternal punishment for their circumstances: “he’s not preaching hell and damnation for our lifestyles and being where we are now.” In other words, they can hear a message that will not preach poverty is a sin and their poor souls are trapped in moral crises, needing to be saved. Kenny Bill, a 54-year-old white man, also says the sermons are much more helpful than the Mission preaching on being lost in the sin of substance abuse and getting found by accepting Christ as savior:

The guest preachers think most of the people that go to the Mission are on drugs. I don’t do drugs. I’ll drink beer but no drugs. They always have a speaker who says ‘I’ve done crack. Quit doing your drugs, it’s all sin. Accept Christ into your life and it will be better. Now I’m with the church so listen to me.’ But Ken is trying to teach about Jesus and God, I mean, finally! You know, follow in Jesus’ footsteps.

Like Kenny Bill, others hear this message at DPC on Wednesday of following in Jesus’ footsteps and are pleased with it. Chris, a “fifty-something” white man and the only official member of DPC among those I interviewed, says that he loves the message of “learning to become a better servant, whether I’m homeless or not.” Chris proudly tells me he is living this out at DPC by doing some janitorial cleaning work on Sunday
mornings. It is his way to give back to the church.\textsuperscript{2} Annie, a 29-year-old white woman comes with her partner, Jimmy, a 37-year-old white man, to worship on days that \textit{The Contributor} is released. They use a proverb to sum up what they see and enjoy about this teaching: “He’s telling us he can lead us horses to water but can’t make us drink. He can’t make us walk, but he can show us the way and that shows he cares.”

Latanya, a 37-year-old African American, comes to escape not so much sermons but the “slop and fights at the Mission” and while she, too, hears the message of “follow in Jesus’ footsteps,” it gives her pause. She explains that it is hard to forgive and get along with “gossiping God-fearing women” at the Mission as well as her Baptist church “hypocrites” who have judged her for living in the Mission and for doing drugs but have not “lifted [her] up for kicking it”. Latanya says that she hears the message of following Jesus in her relationships “even when you’re down,” but she thinks she is “better off on her own,” in other words, living at a distance from others.

Walking Jesus’ path, serving in a church even as a homeless person, following Jesus in their relationships with others—these persons are all are picking up on aspects of one of Ken’s favorite homiletic themes that I call, “No excuses: You are responsible for yourself (i.e., your own actions and feelings) and are not entitled to a free-pass from moral living because you are homeless.” This theme emerged in a variety of sermons. You are responsible for letting go of anger and pain from your family like Leah does in

\textsuperscript{2} McClintock Fulkerson discusses how janitorial practices are often not recognized as bona fide ecclesial practices because they are informal and conventionally gendered as well as more “Martha” (sustaining community through literal upkeep) than “Mary” (sustaining community through intellectual inquiry). See \textit{Places of Redemption}, 141-143.
her rivalry with Rachel over Jacob’s love. Ask yourself, ‘If God loves me, does that mean I can do whatever I want?’ You may think you are David, the underdog in battle against Goliath, but when you choose to feel sorry for yourself and say life has screwed me, no one listens to me and the authorities hate me, you are no David. Your responsibility to do the right thing is a joy, like the Exodus midwives who know they must help give birth and not kill the Hebrew babies. Even the pastor’s prayers will ask God, “remind us there are no excuses and we control our lives.” Ken shared his rationale for his emphasis on this theme: “I give the homeless the same challenge that I give my Sunday congregation. I want them to know they are on par with my Sunday congregation and capable of the same types of ministry—personal evangelism, random acts of kindness. It’s empowerment. I don’t let homelessness be an excuse for not practicing our faith.”

This message of self-responsibility was even applied to the topic of lamenting. When the pastor asked me midway in my fieldwork for my advice on what he could do differently in preaching, I wondered aloud about space in the service being given over to the homeless to lament. The following Wednesday, a sermon was given on suffering often being something that we bring upon ourselves, but we can choose to forget our suffering this week if we work hard at being loving to others suffering more than ourselves and having friends. Thus, the message of self-responsibility (you are responsible for your suffering) and moral living does not stop with yourself but involves being in community and caring for others worse off than you. I asked Bud, a 34-year-old African American, how he heard the message. Bud responded,
Well, he pretty much means that we are suffering but it is on us as to how much. I got real angry with a guy this morning and stayed angry, and you know, that caused me grief and it’s on me. But, what about my suffering from not finding work? Is that on me? And I don’t think having friends is the solution. I don’t have no friends. I guess they could make it easier but I’m safer and better off on my own.

It seems that as the homeless are enjoined to follow in Jesus’ footsteps with the hopes of empowering them to be Christians no different than the non-homeless, some like Latanya and Bud do not feel empowered nor do they seem to really want to risk acting on their agency when they have issues of trust and safety to consider.

I discovered with Larry that homeless persons could hear and miss Ken’s intended empowering call to embrace one’s responsibility of serving others more in need than oneself because they identified with the people in need. Larry pulled out his bible in our interview to look up Mark 9, the topic of the last sermon. Drawing on the story of the disciples’ arguing over who was the greatest and Jesus’ bringing a child to their circle, the sermon began with a brief statement that how you experience being in the middle of the circle all depends on why you are there—you might be the prom queen or you might be getting stoned. The sermon ended with an exhortation that Jesus wants us to go to “the stray cats” and “nobodies”—“the people who have a harder life than us” on the outside to bring the least of these to the middle and in our midst. When I asked Larry

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3 It is worth noting for Bud’s response here that he grew up in the Nashville ghettos, and he will sometimes return to stay with his mother when she allows it. I mention Bud’s ghetto background because he shares here his suffering from not finding work. For a discussion on the disappearance of work in inner-city ghettos and its consequences of chronic joblessness and stigmatization of the poor and blacks, see William Julius Wilson’s *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* (New York: Vintage Press, 1997).
what he heard, he did not mention the summons to care for the other stray cats worse off than him. Instead he recalled the sermon’s beginning about being stoned:

I feel like I’m in the middle. Yeah. Getting stoned. For real. All I can say is, People need to clear out cause I’m only defending myself when they do it. Pastor’s trying to teach here why people like me so, I mean, people shouldn’t treat us like that. That’s what pisses me off cause this [pointing to the bible] is our life right here. These words God wrote, this is for us. Why they don’t listen to God’s word to help us? My momma said a little suffering build character in people. I don’t mind suffering a bit if it’s for the right thing. But I feel like I’m being stoned. If I walk out [of the library] right now, people give me a dirty look for the wrong reason of my being down. If I want to say, ‘why you looking at me like that?’ you think they tell me? No. They move on or laugh or tell me off. Why? They should be hearing this with me.

At times Larry seemed to struggle to articulate what I heard as shame and how the shame moved him at times to want to stand up to the disrespect with fighting. With a sense of righteous indignation, Larry also understands that his faith does not condone his being stoned, or experiencing undignified treatment due to stigmas attached to I am not sure what—he’s poverty, past drug abuse, mental illness or race. Larry finds “life” in the bible in relation to the shame he feels, even as the pastor’s message to him is on something else.

While some homeless persons question the helpfulness of the Wednesday chapel message for their lives on the street, others coming to the service to hear the Word found it helpful for different reasons: they experienced feeling grateful for the church and God; they found a sustaining strength to carry them out into a hard world or through a hard time; they got to hear a refreshing message countering the rigidity of the Missions; some found empowerment in being reminded that they could serve Jesus even as they were homeless. Listening to a sermon in a traditional house of worship is a mark of what
Wuthnow calls “a spirituality of dwelling” or habitation. Wuthnow’s image of “dwelling” captures a person’s relationship to the transcendent and to ultimate meaning and values through an established place of worship. Although Wuthnow finds that most Americans are moving from a “spirituality of dwelling” to a “spirituality of seeking,” Americans still believe that the divine is most accessible in specific contexts such as buildings set apart and made holy by virtue of the divine’s presence. Churches exist to give persons a sanctified place and time set aside to experience the divine primarily through reverence and devotion in the act of worship. Thus, besides listening to a sermon, another feature of a “spirituality of dwelling” is the felt experience of being in a sacred space. A recent study has found that women in poverty named significant spiritual experiences of renewal for them happening in churches (Sullivan 2011, 55). This felt experience of the divine in this sacred space is another reason some of the homeless gave for why they attended DPC’s Wednesday worship.

None of the homeless talked about feeling purified or cleansed in the chapel. Instead the sentient experiences described were usually of feeling peace and stillness that they associated with God. Their reasons for wanting peace varied. Strider, a 28-year-old white man, attends the service because he thinks hearing scripture and being in “God’s house” helps him keep his “anger issue under control and feel calm all over.” He contrasts it to when he was in a mental institution in Utah, “I felt farther to God there. It was more of a controlled space.” Kenny Bill uses a walker after losing a few toes to

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5 Ibid.
frostbite from winter nights without shelter. He almost sounds like he is talking about healing when he says: “I can be in this sanctuary, and I don’t feel any pain in my back and legs. It’s like I’m floating away.” Some talked about feeling serene from the pleasing architecture and referenced the dome ceiling with a small window in its center (see figure 4.3). James “love[s] the little dome of light. I see it and I’m like to melt away any closed in feelings or worries I got.” Troy similarly says, “the world is so hard on me and to come in here, it’s beautiful. The natural light coming in and going with the cloud cover makes me feel God in here.”

![Figure 4.3. Dome of light in DPC chapel](image)

Annie says that she likes to come in here where “all my troubles seem to stop at the doors. When I step into a church, my troubles for that bit of time seem to disappear.” Annie explains the troubles that leave her in this space: “Just from being on my feet vending the street paper or waiting in line. But we spent all morning in court today stressed out dealing with a man who threatened to burn down our camp and tried to get in my pant, so it’s good to be here. It’s my time to relax and talk to God. I can lean up
against Jimmy and just sit and be at peace.” For Annie, a church gives her a respite from being on her feet all day, but she also experiences it as a safe place away from some of the potential traumas she faces in homelessness from dangers of sexual assault to losing what shelter and things she has when camping territories are fought over. Further, both Annie and Jimmy struggle with mental illness and have had difficulty getting their medication consistently from low-income clinics. Jimmy who has been diagnosed mental illness says he has his medication right now but worries about not being able to continue getting them. He likes to come in this space specifically because “when I come and am quiet and still, I feel not so crazy, you know? The way I want to feel in the world and I can take that with me when I go.”

Finally, some said their embodied sensations of peace came as they shed a feeling of placelessness. They link their tranquility to feeling welcome, or feeling as if they had a right to be in this church and a right to dignified treatment. Phyllis says, “I come in to the chapel and just let it go. God is gonna feed the poor and it is gonna be okay—even though you think you’re homeless and poor and feel like, well, let’s just say the pastor makes me feel like I’m where I’m at, I’m just as much welcome to this church service as if I had a million dollars. The preacher don’t make you feel homeless.” Her fiancé James added, “Yeah, he makes you feel like a person welcome to walk into the church house. The way I take, it he makes me feel like even though I don’t have nothing, it’s alright for me to be there in the church house cause he treats me like a person.” Phyllis and James are articulating what the DPC pastor says is one of the things he hopes to proclaim: “You are part of the Body of Christ and a Child of God.”
That James called the church a “house” may simply be his shorthand for a church’s common name, “house of worship,” or it may be pointing to something more. What all of this shows, I think, is that Wuthnow’s concept, “spirituality of dwelling” takes on an added meaning in the context of homeless worship. Wuthnow uses this phrase to deal with the faith of non-homeless persons in his study whose traditional beliefs and practices are rooted in and associated with the life of an established religious institution. While this may be happening here, I also think that some the homeless at this worship service turn to this dwelling of the divine to feel momentarily at home, be it in a sense of belonging, safety, quiet, or claiming some personal space. For instance, Chris will take up an entire front pew to lounge during worship, a posture not normally found in non-homeless white mainstream Protestant worship where manners call for a person to sit upright. Propping his head up on his backpack, Chris stretches along the pew as he listens and readily responds with amens, yes, no, laughter, tsk-tsking. Chris explained his posture, “I make myself at home here. Look, God loves me just the way I am. I don’t worry about it. If someone don’t like it, they can talk to me about where my heart is.”

Or, consider what one woman told me as she got into the food line after chapel one day, “that the service was just what I needed.” When I asked her what she meant she said, “just being in here, in God’s house of worship. My sister just died at Christmas and I’m trying to cope and I mean, I can be at home with the Lord in here, you know?”

Many homeless named the chapel space as a sacred one where they experienced contact with God through feeling peace in their bodies and minds that could momentarily let go of the stress from their lives. However, some responses revealed ambiguity about
how their bodies felt being in the worship service. Troy told me, “I want to say it’s total stress relief, but truth is, I always got my guard up.” “Got my guard up” or as others put it, “watching my back,” I discovered, is shorthand for a homeless habit of not allowing one’s self to totally trust one’s environs. A homeless body may become conditioned to keep the senses heightened and ready to pick up on and steer away from unsafe persons or situations. A homeless body may also become habituated into a posture of isolation—“sticking to myself,” as Troy called it. One aspect of this conditioning is becoming practiced in looking down or looking away from people—not making eye contact that could lead to unwanted conflict. I saw very little eye contact made among worshipping people or between them and the pastor. This also may have been their way of showing they were compliant guests of the church and would not cause any trouble that could get them evicted before lunch was served (a point that goes to discipline and control, to which I will say more about shortly). Dominique and Robin, a 19-year-old African American woman and a 48-year-old white woman, both told me that they do not feel safe here and so do not look at people in the service because they do not know or trust them. They also tried to sit as close as they could to the front because it was more well-lit under the dome and further away from people who would “run everyone over to get to the food.”

Bud, who earlier shared that community was unrealistic and counter to his survival, says that being among this homeless population in the service leaves him feeling distracted and worried that he will be punished, even by the Divine, if he sits near people misbehaving:
I got to keep to myself in here. I try not to look at other people and pay them attention cause I’m going through enough myself. You know, I’m not trying to be like Jesus. I’m not gonna give up my life or die or do this and that for you, I’m sorry. And you know, I think Jesus gonna be okay with me watching out for myself. I’ll pray to the Lord above, that’s what I’m supposed to do, but talking to people here would just be a distraction for me. Like the guy who came in and said, ‘hey, can I get through here?’ He wanted to walk past me and sit down and I stopped up to let him on in without a word wondering why he had to sit here next to me because then, you know, I didn’t get to pay too much attention then. I was real tense. [Bud clinches his body.] Preacher was preaching and that guy wanted to interrupt and raise his hand. I could hear him babbling out right beside me in my ear. I try to pay no attention because I could get in trouble with the preacher or with God.

Bud seems to know that “be[ing] like Jesus” would involve some “this and that” of relationships and community, and it is too great a risk to change the homeless habits he has formed to survive. In a rather defiant tone, Bud tells me that Jesus would authorize his isolating attitude and behavior because he thinks that in his hard times, he cannot “be like Jesus”—he has to watch out for himself.

Truthfully, I, too, felt some apprehension inhabiting this space. The first visits especially I also felt like I had my guard up, though of course, not from street-life habits I had formed to survive. Like some of the homeless, I paid attention to where I sat. While I moved around a few times to be sitting in pews among the homeless, I often gravitated to a side bench because that afforded me with the best view of the whole chapel space and the homeless worshipping there, but the view of the entire space and nearness to an exit did make me feel safer at times. Some of my apprehension may have been related to my being a woman. For example, this chapel service was my first experience of worship as a place for being sexually propositioned. A couple of times I was asked if I wanted to share a tent or room with a man and “make some babies.”
Instinctively, I felt I defensive. I also felt as much as I hate to say it, a startled sense of disbelief akin to, “Does he not see that I am not homeless and he is crossing a line here?”

But this was a rare occurrence and I think my own senses were heightened more not from fear of sexual propositions but because I was the minority non-homeless person in this worship space. I became keenly and sadly aware that I was feeling perhaps not so different from the businessmen who abandoned this service to the homeless in its formative story. As Ken said when he looked out into the pews, I “stuck out like a sore thumb.” I imagine on many days when the service was mostly comprised of black persons, this might have been because of my whiteness, but when I looked around me, I felt out of place not so much due to race (and I concede that I might be blind to my own white habitus in this case) but the homeless-non-homeless cleanliness divide that was displayed on our bodies in appearance and smell.

Smell emerged as an issue both the homeless and I noticed. More than once I was told by men and women that I smelled good and asked if I could share it with them. Smell came up particularly as the weather grew warmer: body odor, sweat, unwashed hair, stale clothes with a scent of cigarettes—surely Lazarus smelled worse awaking from the dead, but these smells, intensified by 50-70 persons all sitting in the chapel space on a hot summer day, created a rather unholy (or, I suppose, holy if I understand that I am placing my body in a new and different space where I can see my own cultured aversion) stench.6 Mostly this went unsaid, but two persons I interviewed told me they tried not to

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6 Perhaps too tangential, but for a discussion on how the stench from the ascetic practices of some early Christians tested the tolerance of others as to how salvation could smell,
smell when people were in here because it was “sick” or “bad.” During the summer seasons, occasionally as I sat down for worship, a homeless person sitting near me would shift his or her body further away and murmur, “Sorry, didn’t get to shower” or a “Sorry, ran out of clean clothes” or just simply, “Sorry.” I would reassure them and wonder if my reassurance was too quickly made or my smile perceived as too forced or pitying. I was surprised to hear such direct apologies since they were addressing a potentially embarrassing and private matter—the cleanliness and keeping up of one’s own personal appearance. I felt as if I was unsettling their potential comfort for being in chapel that day. Perhaps I was in the way of their feeling at home and welcome to be in this place just as they were, clean or not.

In terms of sheer numbers, this was a place they owned—a place mostly of homeless bodies—so when I asked chapel participants if they would like non-homeless persons to attend this service with them, several paused before responding, “No” or “Yes, but” followed by a question. “Maybe. Will they be kind and not judge people?” asked Larry. “Yes, but sometimes people who have a place don’t know how to act. They don’t go by nobody’s rules,” offered Latanya. While Bud said earlier that he feels unsafe in this space, he declined the opportunity to worship with non-homeless at DPC because he felt “comfortable” in a place that isn’t “all fancy with fancy people which would make me feel like I have to be in fancy clothes.” While on one level this space leaves Bud feeling threatened in terms of his physical safety, here he says that this space is not

threatening because he can avoid being the “other” in his poverty marked by his dress.

“Will they just not talk to me the way they do when I pass them on the side walk and I say hello? Will they downgrade to fit in with us?” asked Bud. Years ago, the businessmen left the DPC worship service because they lacked a resurrection imagination (Campbell 2000, 30) to help them see a mixed worship service as redemptive and to motivate them risking a change to their incorporative traditioning of cultured habits. It seems that the homeless attending the service today, too, may suffer from the same lack of imagination and willingness to risk a change that might end in disappointment and further underwriting of the stigmas attached to their homelessness, mental illness, or substance abuse.

Thus far I have tried to describe the complicated ways in which the homeless interpreted the proclaimed message and space of the DPC Wednesday worship service. Unlike the homeless, the pastor, and the church volunteers, I saw something different in the spatial and temporal dimensions of the Wednesday service that did not lend itself to making a faithful place nor practicing a redemptive spirituality but rather re-inscribed the homeless as matter out of place. To make my point, let me first briefly describe how the typical process of entering DPC to attend a Wednesday service and/or lunch works for the homeless person. As early as 11 a.m., homeless persons begin queuing at one of the two side entrances to the church on Fifth Avenue. The line usually snakes around the church onto Church Street. This is a line some downtown realtors have complained about to the pastor because they fear it scares off people as they show property, to which Ken has replied that he wants the line to be a visible reminder lest the city try to forget
the homeless. As the line forms, a door guard is present. For the past four years, the
door guard typically has been Herb, an older white man of average height and build. A
former DPC member and now a practicing Roman Catholic, Herb stands at the door to let
people in for chapel that starts at noon. Herb says that he has been told to limit how
many people (75 persons) come in to the church for chapel due to fire codes. He has a
clicker to keep a tally of the numbers. After letting in 75 persons or less for the worship
service, Herb closes the door.

Once the door is closed, he has instructions not to open it again until chapel is
over and the lunch is ready to start in Fellowship Hall. For those who ask to come into
chapel after they miss the open door call, Herb says, “No, they don’t want to go to
chapel. They just want to come in and get a seat for lunch.” When lunch starts between
12:20-12:30, Herb is then dealing with two lines that will merge together: chapel-goers
stream in from the hallway and the line of homeless persons who have been waiting
outside of the church. Herb alternates, letting in 15 persons at a time from outside, then
15 persons from inside who have been at worship, and so on until all have gone through
the food line and received a first helping from volunteers serving them.

Foucault’s conception of power and the way it operates is helpful here for my
understanding of how DPC structures the time and space of the homeless entering its
disciplinary power in the industrial age and shows how the art of punishing is achieved
through spatial and temporal means with the goal of producing docile bodies that
Foucault’s term, the “docile body” refers to a body that can be “subjected, used, transformed, and improved” through disciplines or “formulas of domination” (180-1). Foucault offers an illustration juxtaposing the pre-modern soldier and the modern solider. The pre-modern soldier is recognized by his natural traits, such as his physical strength and erect posture, and chosen for the military for already having those attributes, in contrast to the modern soldier who is made into a military person by implementing discipline onto the raw material of his body. Foucault argues that the making of a docile body is not a matter so much of controlling the entire body as it is constraining gestures, emotions, and attitudes. He suggests the body is an “object and target of power” for a variety of institutions: prisons, schools, hospitals, armies, monasteries, even a capitalist economy desiring efficiency—these all work to correct and control the body for their own goods (180). Thus, the docile body is a “practiced body” subjected to training and coercion of gestures, movements, and attitudes be it ascetic bodies in renunciation at monasteries, soldier bodies obeying army rules, or apprentice bodies training in a workshop (182).

Foucault explores the spatial disciplinary means of social control to make docile bodies through enclosure, surveillance, partitioning, and rank (189-191). Such ways are found at DPC on Wednesdays when homeless persons who want to attend DPC for worship and/or the lunch are confined to an outside line, a kind of division and tight organization of human action whereby they ideally can not cluster but face forward, and so would less likely break out into fights and subvert the order of the outdoor city and

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then indoor church space. The presence of the higher ranking of a door guard who gives ingress and egress achieves control as well because the homeless are under his surveillance once they come to the door. Foucault uses examples in *Discipline and Punish* of modern prisons and mental hospitals and their precursors of medieval plague towns and leper colonies for understanding social control through separation or partitioning into mad/sane, sick/healthy, or abnormal/normal.8 Likewise, the line kept outside until the guard allows entrance is a similar partitioning reproducing the binary stigmatizing distinction between them/us, uncivilized/mannered, or dangerous/harmless that the homeless encounter.

When I asked Herb to tell me about his job on Wednesdays at DPC, Herb said, “I work the door. Often, I can’t let people in and people don’t like to hear that they have to wait, even for a minute.” Listening to Herb, I think of a bar or club bouncer who might describe his job this way—as a kind of gatekeeper. Interestingly, two former door persons chose to describe their position’s purpose in different ways, as greeting and being with the homeless. Out of the different aspects of his position that Herb could have chosen to focus on and share with me—the counting, the welcoming of the homeless into the church, the informal conversation with them at the door, forming relationships with any regular comers—he immediately shares the aspect of his keeping people out and their dissatisfaction at being forced to wait.

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Herb says that he thinks that on any given day, three-fourths of the people in the line are actively dealing with substance abuse and “are on something.” He called street life “being in survival mode” and draws on an uncivilized image: “it’s like a jungle,” implying that the rationale for the line and his presence are that the homeless need control in their lack of civility. For Herb the “jungle” or uncivilized mentality of the homeless requires the order and control of line and guard, and perhaps also is the cause of their difficulty in waiting. By and large, Herb reports feeling comfortable at the door, but he says that he often recalls a memory from several years ago of a fist fight between homeless persons on Fifth Avenue that he helped to break up. “‘We all have knives,’ one of them told me. I can’t help but consider safety here. It has stayed in the back of my mind as I do this.’” “I can’t help but consider safety” implies Herb’s habituated response of fear and distrust especially after such an encounter where his body learned it firsthand. As I later reflected on this, I found myself recalling my own visceral response of fear to the nearness of and potential for violence in the Living Room. This was subsequent to one Living Room meeting when a woman who had run away from her abusive partner announced she was ready to take care of herself with the gun she had at her feet in her suitcase.

Being able to fight is an embedded survival strategy or what Payne and Ehlig calls a “hidden rule” of the poor. Working things out through violence can be seen as “a virtue” and for some may provide their “only hope on a secure path” (49). Fighting also

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can be a form of entertainment for the poor, or what I’ve heard some of the homeless call “drama.” Payne and Ehlig further point out that the use of the casual register discourse by the underclass affects cognition (35-36). Talking in a casual register with its lack of sequence and complete sentence structures can retard a person’s development of the ability to plan. Without practice and development of the ability to plan, often persons cannot identify cause and effect and consequences nor can they predict. This also brings a loss of controlling impulsivity. This point by Payne and Ehlig—that the use of casual language impacts the inclination among the poor to get in trouble behaviorally and to solve problems through violence—sheds light on the hidden rule of fighting among the poor, a habit that the door guard hopes to lessen in his disciplinary presence.

In being the gatekeeper to this element of perceived potential unruliness at best or drug induced danger at worst, Herb sincerely believes he is practicing his faith, or as he puts it “living the Gospel.” In fact, “living the Gospel” is why he has been doing this job for four years. He explained to me that he is “a great believer in really walking the walk.” Being the doorman is his way of helping the homeless, particularly after his encounter with one homeless pregnant diabetic woman. Herb took her to lunch “and wanted to do more” but did not have a way to do so. When he discovered in a Wednesday meal prayer that she had died in the cold, “it brought home how real the problem of homelessness is.” That event, coupled with his own life experience with alcoholism, made him realize “how vulnerable we all are.” Thus, Herb understands his acting as the doorman as his way of paying attention to the problem of homelessness and
an opportunity to practice gratitude and humility in remembering that he, too, could be one step away from this life.

It is interesting that the gospel propels him to want to “do more” for the homeless in this capacity. He is not shying away from or avoiding the poor but comes faithfully to the church and serves the church by counting the homeless and upholding its rules for the lines. Herb sees himself embodying the good news to the poor; he gets that homelessness is a real problem, he has felt compassion for one of them and been moved by her untimely and unnecessary death, and he means to bring a measure of safety and order needed for a large feeding. However, even as he considers his role of doorman at DPC a religious practice, the role’s disciplinary power as well as his own view of the homeless as uncivil and his own visceral feelings of distrust of the homeless that persist after encountering them for four years at the door do not seem to point to a redemptive or faithful place that breaks down social barriers and stigma attached to homelessness.

As Herb talks about what he does, Herb focuses on the impatience of the homeless that he seems to find uncalled for: “people in the line don’t like to hear that they have to wait, even for a minute.” Surely, Herb must hear a lot of grumbling about inclement weather as he holds the door closed during the worship service time and repeatedly stops at every 15 persons—and with the numbers of homeless coming to the worship and/or lunch on Wednesdays, he can be encountering over 200 person in one day. However, his perspective of the homeless persons seems to show his own blinders to the homeless habitus of waiting and the demeaning feelings it can bring.
Waiting in lines is a daily life activity of the displaced, as Troy says this about his experience of homelessness:

My life now consists of lines. It consists of being told to ‘Hurry up’ and ‘Wait.’ You’re waiting, waiting, waiting. You begin to feel like you don’t count. You’re waiting to wash clothes and then with them to make sure they don’t get stolen. You’re waiting in line to find a shower. You’re waiting in line to get a bus pass and then catch the bus. You’re waiting in line to enter the library when it opens or get on the Internet. And then, all day, you’re waiting to go back to your camp and worried someone might have found it and stolen everything. Sometimes when I go to where my tent is I wait along the way because I don’t want to be seen going up in there because some of my things already have gotten stolen. So I’m waiting to enter and exit. Isn’t that crazy? It’s a lot of waiting. Over and over again.

Sounding somewhat like a modern day Qoheleth on the vanities of life, Troy gets at two primary features of the temporal dimension of life for matter out of place—waiting and repetition. The cyclical orientation of time for the destitute as a means of survival has been addressed in literature on homelessness and poverty.\(^{10}\) In Harry Murray’s ethnography on a soup kitchen, Murray observes that the homeless largely do not live according to a linear orientation of future thinking, progression toward achieving long-term goals, and distinguishing times such as annual holidays or weekends with the significance of leisure accorded to non-homeless persons. Instead, the homeless live in an endlessly repetitive cyclical time, which involves waiting and often in lines—daily schedules such as those of shelters, feedings, day labor, and libraries; weekly

appointments with social services; and, monthly check days from social security, welfare, or disabilities aid.

Street life typically runs on this cyclical time orientation for two reasons: the homeless person’s focus on present survival, a goal that must be met and re-accomplished daily, and the homeless person’s dependency on the cyclic schedules of particular institutions (Murray 1984, 59). Thus, the institutional rules governing time work to control and circumscribe their lives sociospatially into daily routines of when and where it is acceptable for them to be and when and where they need to be to in order to survive. Rules governing time keep the homeless constantly on the move and waiting in line in most of the same routines and places. Consider how the Missions demand that clients be off the property by 6 am (if not attending morning chapel) and in order to get a bed ticket, to be back and in the bed ticket line by 3 pm. If they are disabled and without a bus pass, homeless persons sometimes leave DPC on Wednesday as early as 1:15 to begin slowly making their way back to the Missions in order to be at the head of the line and secure a bed. If they stayed for entire Living Room meetings or street paper release meetings, they could risk losing a night of shelter in a busy month. Or consider the cycle of the monthly issuing of checks: at DPC, the numbers of homeless persons for worship and feeding appear to correlate to the monthly check day schedule. More persons show up at DPC on Wednesdays as the month progresses and resources dwindle, but weeks when checks are issued, numbers decrease. This is something Ken even jokes about when he sees smaller numbers in his service to let people know that he is aware of this cycle’s influence on how many attend DPC’s service.
Thus, being poor is to a large extent a life defined by waiting, which affects a poor person’s power. Pierre Bourdieu in his *Pascalian Meditations* (2000) identifies waiting as one way a dominant power creates submission: “Making people wait...delaying without destroying hope...adjourning without totally disappointing.” The cumulative waiting experiences of the poor show that they are not fully in control; when aid is needed, it often requires a drawn-out process to obtain it. This process to get help is hardly ever a “one-shot event” but one of “endless hassles” in which the destitute can experience uncertainties, arbitrariness, and misunderstanding, all of which have the potential to change the person’s attitude or behavior (Auyero 2011, 14). The entire waiting experience as it is repeated daily in the routines of the poor can create Foucaultian docile bodies—bodies trained to be constrained by weariness and helplessness and in the experience of endless waiting and lines, regulated bodies that become compliant to their service providers and must endure in order to survive (Auyero 2011, 14). Studies show that the poor and incarcerated experience protracted and repeated waiting as demeaning, or as Troy said, “like you don’t count.” Barry Schwartz observes that to be kept waiting long is used as a kind of punitive sanctioning; it sends the message to the waiting person that his or her “own time and social worth is less

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valuable than the time and worth of the one imposing the wait.”

Thus, waiting can be stratified according to social power: often, the more power a person has, the less he or she waits.

I discovered some of this in the context of DPC’s outdoor line for myself. An interesting moment in my interview with Herb came up when he recalled how I was late one time. I remembered this—I was racing to get here from teaching class and between a student question and unusually heavy traffic, I came to the door about ten minutes after 12. Herb would not open the door. He described me, much to my embarrassment, as “angry.” I recall feeling and expressing more indignation than anger (although the two can go in hand). It was an eye-opening moment into the DPC disciplinary trifecta of the waiting line-locked door-door guard and hit home how much the homeless are at the mercy of the rigid schedules of institutions servicing them with little to no flexibility. DPC’s schedule for the service is organized around what Foucault calls “a whole micropenalty of time” (Rabinow 1986, 194) whereby lateness is punished with no entry into the chapel. I thought there must have been some miscommunication and Herb misunderstood who I was and what I was doing. It all had a sting of humiliation and powerlessness to it. “Who are you to tell me that I cannot go in there?” I thought. I recall feeling disbelief that I could not gain ingress into a church building for a worship service because I was running late. Had this been a non-homeless worship service, I

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would have simply tiptoed into the back pews—no person standing guard to decide for me if or when I could walk inside.

I was undeterred. I felt incensed by the absurdity that I could not enter a house of worship for a worship service. Further, I felt incensed because, as much as I am embarrassed to admit this, I felt entitled. Herb knew I was not homeless and he knew from looking at me and talking to me that I was not going to be violent or run inside the church and wreak chaos, yet he keeping me from my fieldwork in the service. I turned around, went to the next side door where the church secretary buzzed me in, and I then proceeded to walk into chapel for my fieldwork. Herb described what I did—“You just ignored me when I said you couldn’t come in. You didn’t wait. You went to another door and went in, anyway. And I just didn’t care.” I paid no attention to Herb’s disciplinary power because I felt confident in my own non-homeless power and I did not need to depend on him for future meals on Wednesdays. I felt I had a right to be there and a right to enter a church and worship even if late. I went straight to the head of the line to have this conversation with him and none of the homeless persons questioned my doing that. Granted, they may not have wanted to go inside to worship, but they raised no qualms about my “cutting line” or getting inside because, I imagine, they saw my non-homeless status as giving me a right to do that and challenging that could cause conflict and so a loss of entry to the meal.

What’s more, I figured as Herb admitted, that Herb did not really care either. I assumed he ultimately would be more indifferent about my entering or exiting because I was not really someone he was there to care about entering without permission. Could he
have felt, with an audience of homeless persons in line, that his authority was at stake and come chasing after me and expelled me from the church? I suppose, but I figured right: he felt he needed to stay at the door to stand guard with those he did care about transgressing and I got in and saw how the rule of keeping the doors closed was being arbitrarily imposed.

During my fieldwork, I observed that by and large the homeless were practiced in following the line rules. I realized how some had internalized this discipline of waiting outside until officially allowed in one rainy day when Herb was running late (a rarity) and there was no guard. There was a short line for most of the 11 o’clock hour, maybe 25 persons showed up to the service that day, and I was curious to see what would transpire in this line without the door guard present, the rain falling, and that particular side door unlocked. Chris, the one homeless person I interviewed who is a member of DPC, made arrangements to be inside already. As he put out glasses with ice, he was telling me how he recently worked out a deal to help volunteers set up and wash dishes for $20 to pay his fiancée’s motel rent. As I followed him outside to continue our conversation about the Drake Motel and his aspirations for starting a new tent community, a woman wanted to know if they could come inside because of the rain. Before I could answer, a man asked, “Wait, do you work here?” When I told him no, he looked at the woman, “Never mind. We can’t get in. We are supposed to stay out here til it starts.” And he moved to the door as if taking it upon himself to be the gatekeeper until another volunteer or Herb showed up.
The homeless man seemed to express an “I might get in trouble at any moment” mentality and was conforming to the rule even in the absence of the door guard. He was also teaching the newcomer the importance of following the rule of staying outside, even in inclement weather. From what I saw, this event showed the possibility of the homeless man internalizing not just the “power of the Norm” at work in the DPC Wednesday homeless timetable but what Foucault calls a “gaze” (Rabinow 1986, 196). Key to Foucault’s notion of disciplinary power and making docile bodies for capitalist production is the panopticon, a structure planned by eighteenth-century philosopher Jeremy Bentham, that was meant for the constant surveillance of prisoners from an unseen central observation point (Rabinow 1986, 206-213). The objective of the panopticon is for the prisoner to internalize the authoritative gaze: after being “subjected to a field of visibility” he “assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself…he becomes the principle of his own subjugation” (Foucault 1977, 202-03). Foucault contends that observation is a key part of discipline; coercive power is connected to sight and being seen (Rabinow 1986, 216). Eventually, the prisoner assumes he is being watched but not knowing for certain, so discipline becomes self-regulating rather than just a matter of external overseeing. Granted, the DPC Wednesday door guard is very much visible to the homeless and his gaze is not one of mega surveillance. However, it seems that his watchful presence still achieves a similar effect of which Foucault speaks about the panopticon: some of the homeless, without the door guard around, are trained now to inspect themselves, perhaps understanding it as a moral imperative on the church grounds. They can impose the door
guard’s gaze on their own bodies and participate in the discipline that prohibits them from transgressing into the church.

Once the homeless persons enter the chapel worship space, the disciplinary control may continue in a sermon message and rules for being in chapel that can encourage people to keep order and act appropriately but they can also promote shame. Even if the homeless attending this service have avoided waiting time in the outdoor line, they must rejoin it in the Fellowship hall meal line. It is for this line that the Wednesday chapel sermons work to shape homeless listeners into compliance. Repeatedly, the parting words to the homeless congregation are to go live out the Kingdom of God in the Fellowship Hall’s food line. A New Year’s sermon on making new choices and repentance ends with the advice, “And the lunch line is the place to start.” The following week, the homeless are told “the line is the place to show you’re a disciple, that you are set apart.” Lent brings a sermon on the path to the cross that concludes with, “and this path leads you to the line where you can begin to follow Jesus there.” A homily on Elijah asking the widow of Zarephath to bring him “what you have least of” wraps up with an injunction to practice a “least of” attitude when taking your place in the line. Finally, the message on Jesus’s miracles in Mark ends on a plea to remember, before the homeless go into the Fellowship Hall with the wealthy volunteers and their youth, that “we can calm the chaos and be patient in the chaos of the line with those who are plagued by demons of alcoholism and drugs.” Their final send-off into the line may be a part of the good news, but subtly discipline is being administered with these admonitions that imply the
homeless need reminders to practice proper behavior; having proper manners in the line is conflated with Christian living.

To be fair, by focusing on the line, the pastor arguably is meeting the homeless where they are in this moment of their lives. Further, he is trying to keep the peace among strangers in his church and feels a responsibility for creating a safe atmosphere as well as keeping an old church building unharmed. The pastor may be trying to teach and enforce behavior that allows for needed social functioning. Ken, as I said earlier, wants the homeless, as he says, “to come away with a sense of how I can still live out the good news even lacking resources. I take courage in the fact that every now and then some display a sense of moral vibrancy and I see some signs of ‘this is how I’m supposed to behave.’” Still, it is hard to imagine that the pastor would end each sermon to the DPC non-homeless congregation with such injunctions to remember how they should behave as disciples of Jesus in a breakfast line or the pastor’s receiving line or the gathering space of the vestibule. It is doubtful that the DPC non-homeless congregation receives a disciplinary admonition to keep middle class manners couched as Kingdom of God living because they already are practiced in them and are not living in a “jungle” (so, the door guard) but are feeling safe being surrounded by others like them who have been habituated into proper manners.

And what do the homeless think of the door guard, the lines, and these injunctions to behave for Jesus in the line? First, all of the homeless I interviewed find the door guard and the line to be necessary for preserving order. Several of them like Troy described the line as “a lotta people cussing with no morals or standards.” Troy added, “I
about want to fight back cause they’re hypocrites for coming onto church property and use that language. I consider myself a Christian and want to get inside and get away from all of that.” Rick compared it to the lines in county jail with “lots of pushing and shoving, like a mob.” Robin said, “people try to act tough and then it can just get out of control.” She added, “it would be a total fiasco if there were no guard. We all know he will kick people out if needed.” Jimmy and Annie called it “hectic” with “so much arguing and drama it’s shameful with everyone downtown walking by and staring. We just try to blend in, lay low, and stay quiet.” From those descriptions, it is easy to see why “dodging the line” was a common reason given by worship participants for their attendance. Even though Ken constantly reminds people at the beginning of each service their coming to worship is not making the waiting any less (because they will still wait and enter the line 15 at a time), not only are they sitting inside in a dry and comfortable place, they are now away from the “drama” of the line and exposure to people staring.

Not only do these homeless perceive the worship service providing them with some reprieve from the line’s chaos, but attending the service also provides a form of stigma management for people like Jimmy and Annie, in that they now have a way of avoiding feeling exposed to non homeless persons (Snow and Anderson 1987, 1349). The homeless I interviewed never said that they themselves needed the line or the guard but that the line was needed by those homeless unable to behave in an orderly way without them. As such, they were using a technique of distancing themselves from being identified or associated with these other homeless persons who may bring on a negative label and do not share their same morals and values.
As for the admonitions in the sermons to behave properly in the line, interestingly, very few homeless picked up on and wanted to talk about this message. When they did, they chose to hear in the admonitions a call for discipleship without the link to discipline and instead heard that they belonged to and had a place in Jesus. James said, “I like the way it ends—if you’re one of my disciples then go—as if to say, you are one of the disciples. You’re with Jesus.” Some did not take the admonitions as meant for themselves personally. Judy said, “the pastor taught me to treat others right when we go in there for lunch, but I already knew that. That was for the others in the sanctuary.” Kenny Bill shared, “I know it takes a lot to reach a lot of those homeless guys in there and stick it in their ears. He’s got to say it to them before we get to the line.” Like some of the homeless who distanced themselves from the others in the line outside of worship as a way to manage the stigma attached to homelessness, again this distancing technique seems to be used by Judy and Kenny Bill in regards to the pastor’s admonition.

In a word, those I interviewed perceive that the homeless coming to DPC need the control of the line and guard as well, but that this control does not apply to themselves. They distance themselves from those homeless making “drama” and “giving them a bad name.” They distance themselves from the line by physically dodging it, and in so doing they not only avoid one more wait in their endless waiting but they also distance themselves from the stigma of the line in terms of their identity. But even in the service, they need to continue to manage their stigma identities when they hear disciplinary injunctions to live out their faith and be good and practice self-control in the food line.
The chapel was also the space for more overt discipline that could lead to shame. Occasionally, persons in the service were reprimanded for breaking the pastor’s one rule: do not distract others. I observed what Foucault calls a “micropenalty of time” and “a micropenalty of activity” (Rabinow 1986, 194) when homeless persons were called out if they interrupted the present task of listening quietly during worship or did not behave appropriately and were impolite and disobedient. Consider this illustration in Kim, a twenty-one-year-old African American woman who has been coming to the worship service along with the Living Room for the past four or five months. In our interview, she told me that one way she likes to express her faith and feel close to God is in journaling. She started doing it while staying at the Mission. She takes notes on what she hears at the Mission chapel service and what she reads in her bible. She also writes down advice she gets at the Living Room from her “spiritual fathers and mothers.” She has received praise for her efforts in journal keeping from those group leaders. Kim says she likes to go back and re-read her writing to get wisdom and to make better decisions about people she can trust.

Kim also likes to write down what she hears and gets out of sermons at DPC. At one Wednesday worship in late August, Kim is taking notes on a sermon on Ephesian 6.10. The sermon started with a question, “Has someone ever given you a job but not all the directions or tools to do it?” For the past couple of weeks, Kim has talked in the Living Room about having conflict with her boss at Goodwill and feeling anxious because she is never sure what he wants and feels like he does not communicate to her what he wants. She has considered yelling at him and quitting. She is nodding and
saying yes to Ken’s question and begins writing what I imagine might be a response out of her own recent trials at Goodwill. A cell phone rings, but Ken ignores it and moves into a discussion of how we Christians should resist evil. As Ken gives different examples of evil and so is working to resist and name “the powers of death in the world” (Campbell 2000, 75)—African miners killed on strike, Mississippi women unable to get abortions if raped, and Tennessee voter identity laws—Kim is busily writing. A loud noise comes from her as she turns a page in her spiral notebook. Maybe it’s the stickiness from summer humidity. Ken pauses, looks at Kim and tells her sharply to stop distracting people in the service. Many of us shift in our seats, look at her and wait for her response.

Hastily, she looks down and puts her pen and notebook aside as Ken continues preaching. After the service, I approach Kim and another young woman, Taroline, whom she met at the Mission. Taroline was talking about the sermon’s point on voter identification in relation to the police not returning her driver’s license when they arrested her. She was in the middle of asking me how to get back her license when Kim told me that she was mad and embarrassed about being called out in worship. She explained, “when the cell phone went off, the preacher didn’t get into that with him and he’s told people to turn off their phones or leave before. Why did he pick on me? I was talking to nobody. Just taking in the word. What does he think just because I’m young and have nothing, he can do that with me in worship?” Kim was upset by what she felt was an unfair situation where she was not treated with dignity. Being treated differently
or negatively and encountering arbitrary rules has been identified by homeless persons as times when they feel their dignity is undermined (Miller and Keys 2001, 344-5).

Silently thinking to myself, I had to agree with Kim, not only that the rule seemed enforced at the pastor’s discretion and that the treatment of her was unfair, but also that a non-homeless person who had more than “nothing” would have been passed over for accidentally making a similar noise in a non-homeless worship service, say from dropping a hymnal. I cannot think of a time in a worship service with non-homeless persons where a preacher stopped mid sermon to respond to a noise and disciplined someone in an authoritative and punitive tone, or what Payne and Ehlig call “the parent voice.” To do that would shame a parishioner.

Ken may think in enforcing his one rule of “don’t distract other people,” he can stress one of his main homiletic messages—in Kingdom of God living, you are responsible for your own actions including following rules in worship meant to maintain safety and reverence for a sacred space. However, it is also a moment of shaming one in an already shame-prone population, and a moment of not making a place for persons treated as matter out of place. After this event, while I continued my fieldwork, I no longer saw Kim come to the service.

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14 In Payne and Ehlig’s discussion of the survival strategy of fighting among the poor, they note that the poor are very independent and do not respond well to a middle or upper class person talking to them in a “parent voice.” It can often leads to conflict since the person in poverty may hear a judging tone and may see fighting as a more respect-gaining response than responding with submission in a “child voice.” Ehlig and Payne, What Every Church, 19, 41-48.
Recalling the pastor’s goal and hope to teach the homeless that they are beloved children of God and noting how this particular sermon was working to “expose the powers of death” (Campbell 2000, 75), I assume that in this moment the pastor isn’t intending to shame Kim and discourage her from coming to worship. But his theological beliefs and ideals on the one hand and his disciplinary practices to maintain control and create docile bodies do not line up. In this situation setting an example for others trumped treating the homeless woman with dignity. He automatically assumed her noise signified that she was not actually engaged in listening to the preaching and so ironically punished one of his most attentive listeners.

In the worship space, disciplining could lead to misunderstandings between the pastor and the homeless when homeless persons wrongly assumed they were the ones being reprimanded. For example, at one service, Ken had just begun preaching on Isaiah’s commissioning in Isaiah 6 and had opened with a question of, “Have you ever had someone come up to you and tell you what to do?” After getting several murmurs of “yes” and “all the time,” he moved into the story of the prophet, but two persons sitting toward the middle of the chapel were texting and whispering. Ken paused in his preaching and gave the two persons a grim look. An African American man sitting in the pew directly front of the guilty texters called out to Ken. Apparently, the man assumed Ken’s disapproving stare was aimed at him. “Stop looking at me,” he repeatedly shouted. Ken told this man that he was looking at the two persons sitting behind him. Ken used a calm voice that struck me as less “parent voice” and one that was more “adult voice” (Ehlig and Payne 1999, 41-45), and so in both tone and explanation, he seemed working
to accord some respect to the man. However, the man and a woman next to him got up and left the service. As they left, the man was still talking to Ken, “Ain’t gotta pay you no attention. You don’t like the homeless.” The two texters stopped and the service continued.

Observing this, it seems that the man was trying to keep some sense of honor in what may have been for him a shaming experience. In speaking out and then leaving, he was trying to “save face,” as Goffman puts it. In Goffman’s analysis of the ritual elements in social interaction, he calls the face the “positive social value” claimed by a person (5). When persons have embarrassing or more demeaning incidents and are in danger of losing face, Goffman says they may “save face” by resorting—as this man did in the service—to “tactless retaliation” and withdraw in a visible huff (23). Retaliation has a high cost to salvaging face because it easily escalates to conflict in attempting to deny the offender, the pastor in this case, of his status. Here, the man who misunderstood the pastor’s disciplinary stare as meant for him was working to “save face” by leaving on his own terms before the authority figure could potentially order him to leave. It seems that while Ken tried to relieve him of the need to save face, it was too late for Ken’s compensation and the man was set to leave.

But why could this man not remain and continue listening once Ken explained the misunderstanding? The man’s imperative to Ken stop looking at him hints at the possibility of his being shame-prone. Writers on shame identify exposure as the central

element of the shame experience. Pattison observes that the shamed person “feels that they can suddenly be seen to their disadvantage in a direct and uncomfortable” way (71-2). This key feature of exposure in shame involves a sense of being judged or scrutinized for one’s whole self. Perhaps the pastor’s nonverbal cue of discipline—a gaze—left the man feeling seen in a diminished way. If shame involves an urgent wish to disappear or cover oneself after a keenly felt experience of unwanted or painful exposure, then it makes sense that this man, were he shame-prone, would want to leave the service. The pastor’s disciplinary gaze, felt by the man to be on him, might have triggered “governing scenes” or powerful past experiences of similar distress that can create and perpetuate states of shame. Disciplining for distracting behavior in the worship service can happen based on misunderstandings, be it a verbal reprimand to an actively involved listener like Kim or a judging gaze felt by an innocent worshiper and intended for someone else. As such, it can be shaming and so seem to diminish rather than nurture a homeless person’s capacity for feeling Beloved, made in the Image of God, and part of the Body of Christ.


17 Kaufman, drawing on biopsychology and depth psychology, coined this term, “governing scene.” Times in a young person’s life where he or she is met with a shameful response can repeat until the cumulative experience of these times become magnified into overriding orientations or governing scenes. Governing scenes where we remember our interpersonal needs being unmet can lead to feelings of shame and unlovability. They come to govern not only a person’s memory but also to shape his or her personality. They also shape a person’s responses in the interpersonal because they are accompanied and intensified by “scripts,” habitual negative words or actions about the self as well as visual images—such as a punitive gaze. In this way, governing scenes guarantee getting relived in the future and perpetuating shame. Kaufman, *The Psychology of Shame*, 58-60, 100.
Finally, disciplinary control works itself out in the worship service simply in how the service is ordered. Since the prayer and homily both come from the pastor who is the one leading and talking for the service’s entirety, there are fewer opportunities for disorder among the homeless. What I see missing here is liturgy, or work of the people gathered in the chapel. Of course, many are selecting to attend this service because they like it just as it is and prefer that they do not have to actively participate. They can simply sit in the chapel and be in a quiet space inside and away from the noise of the city. However, when I asked the homeless participants, what if anything they would change, none wanted more time for personal prayer in silence. Three women wanted singing added. One man, Bud, wanted time given to the homeless reading scripture:

Maybe the people could relate with one another reading scripture, see what they get out of it for our messes. And if I’m homeless and my homeless friends are around me and they see me get up there and start showing how I care for God and reading powerful scripture, maybe they’ll think, ‘I could do that, too.’ Not just the reading but the believing and the motivating them in their situation. When someone is down, it can help if they see you down. I mean, it’s easy for us to look up to someone reading who already is in the higher standards of life and be like, ‘uh huh, okay, be ready to move on with the show.’ But if we see someone up there who in the same situation, and you showing them, ‘look, I care about God just like you do, but y’all see I’m in a messed up situation like you and trying to do better, well everyone may want to do better, you know?’

What’s intriguing about Bud’s suggestion for changing the service, is not so much the addition of scripture reading but his reasoning and what it reveals. Bud wants the homeless persons to “get up there” in a place of authority where the pastor is to give them some hope and model for them that one of their own is “trying to do better.” Further, he wants scripture reading to be a time when “they can relate to one another.” For someone who has said he does not feel safe looking at others in worship and that Jesus would
authorize his own isolated form of discipleship to keep to himself, Bud’s desire for more active participation and some relationality with “homeless friends” in this worship service is noteworthy. If he typically says he is not willing to take a risk to be in community, here through liturgy, he is.

What I saw in the worship service’s simple pray-proclaim pattern was an enactment of the gospel whose end was concerned with creating uniform behavior of docile bodies to be compliant in the feeding line and Fellowship Hall lunch more so than providing real chances to practice friendship, testimony, forgiveness, or reconciliation between the homeless and non-homeless. This, along with the line and door guard in front of locked doors showed how the spatial and temporal structures can further rather than reverse the homeless feeling like they are transgressors in the Body of Christ. So, on one hand, DPC Wednesday worship does not seem to seriously challenge the norm of segregating and stigmatizing the poor. As DPC former associate pastor Linda White surmised, “I don’t think this service is making a real difference for the homeless.” On the other hand, even as some homeless say they feel “on guard” among so many homeless strangers, the worship service is perceived by the majority of the homeless as helpful. For many, it is experienced as a site of their lived faith in the message that they hear that lifts them or in the sacred space they get to briefly inhabit where sensed peace of mind and body connect them to God. Being inside the church walls and hearing a proclamation gives some a sense of belonging, serenity, even home. It is from this social world that I now turn to one where the homeless are the ones proclaiming with their bodies and street papers out in the city of Nashville.
Chapter 5

*The Contributor* Vendors: Work on Street Corners as Sites of Lived Faith

All around Nashville are grassy medians and street corners that now show faded wear with patches of dirt. They have been worn down by *Contributor* vendors walking back and forth as they sell their papers. A worn down path provides an apt metaphor for these nearly 400 homeless and formerly homeless men and women who are making a place for themselves throughout the city. Back and forth, their imprints have marked their mapped areas (or maps, as they call their work sites) and declare their right to be in “prime spaces” and be regarded as contributors to society.¹

Because the street paper takes the vendors away from the *Contributor* office at DPC and out into the city, how this particular social world is a faithful place giving the homeless vendors a place to appear as fully human really involves the larger faithfulness of the city and its communities of non-homeless persons. The vendors scattered across the city are living out the formative story of the street paper: giving the homeless a dignified work alternative to panhandling and a way out of homelessness; giving an alternative voice in the media to combat stereotypes of homelessness and offer their

¹ “Prime spaces” consist of residential, commercial, and recreational areas that non-homeless residents, businesses, and political figures regularly use and defend as their own. In contrast, marginal spaces are undesirable areas that lack value for the non-homeless and are left to powerless and stigmatized populations. *Contributor* vendors are coming into contact with domiciled persons and contesting their economic place in highly visible parts of Nashville’s prime spaces. David Snow and Leon Anderson, *Down on their Luck: A Study of Homeless Street People* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 103-105.
perspectives on issues of poverty; and, giving the vendors and non-homeless persons opportunities for face-to-face interaction that can build community across various lines.

This chapter explores how faith enters into the work of vendors on the city streets, particularly in relation to appearing as more than transgressors of “prime spaces.” Selling street papers, work often described in biblical language by the vendors, carries spiritual significance for many who feel led to it by God. Most vendors feel they are educating the public that the homeless are more than the stigmas attached to homelessness especially through the panhandling. Other vendors also derive meaning from their work because they feel commissioned by God to write for the street paper to voice their discontent with unjust living conditions or advocate for the homeless for their personhood and right to work in “prime spaces.” But more than writing, their embodied presence on the street corners is what put a face on homelessness, and gives both the homeless vendors and their customers redemptive opportunities to unlearn cultured visceral habits of strangerliness. Some describe themselves as preachers, or, as I see it, a kind of holy fool, whose embodied sign-acts invite the non-homeless not only to buy their papers but to engage them with dignity. Beyond the call to deliver a particular message, some homeless bring faith into their work location and make it more their own through five activities or practices, such as experiencing financial miracles and having spiritual experiences through sounds.

As introduced in chapter 2, The Contributor is the top selling street paper among the 28 street papers in North America. The Contributor’s topics mean to give the homeless’ perspectives on issues of poverty that often get overlooked in the mainstream
media. Contributor pieces have explored a variety of things including personal stories of homeless persons and their struggles with and triumphs over addictions; their challenges of getting by on minimum wage; why some people hate the homeless; the impact of the unhealthy local waterways on homeless campers; and poetry, pictures, and even a “Hoboscope” provided by homeless writers and photographers.

Selling the street paper provides an unlikely path to stable housing, but it has helped over a third of the vendors get housing. Vendors can make hundreds of dollars a month or more with sales and tips, thus giving them a basic level of income that has helped some rent apartments or pay for medical and utility expenses. With almost 400 vendors selling two editions each month, the paper aims to give the homeless a micro-business enterprise that serves as an alternative to panhandling. Vendors start out with 15 free papers to sell for a dollar and can buy additional copies for 25 cents. The 25 cents covers the printing of the papers and extras such as badges and paper bags. Vendors can earn free copies when they have a customer make a donation in their behalf or they contribute pieces to an edition. They must sign a code of conduct requiring sobriety while working, respect toward all, staying off private property, wearing an identification badge, and not selling anything else while vending. Vendors can choose where they sell as long as their spot is not mapped by another vendor.

Of the vendors I interviewed, many talked about feeling called to this work and finding their paper selling to be an important location for them to bring their faith as they

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made meaning of their work and their interactions with the non-homeless. The intersection of faith and work has been explored over the past two decades among theologians and sociologists of religion; particularly around the notion of vocation and the role of religion in the meaning persons give to their work. A cursory Google search of faith and work shows several university faith and work initiatives and a proliferation of websites, blogs, authors, and groups seeking to bring spirituality and spiritual practices into the work place, particularly businesses, through such means as stewardship, bible studies, or mindfulness training. Attention to faith and vocation often begins before joining the workforce in higher educational settings; discerning one’s vocation has become a regular part of some undergraduate offerings to its students whose college experience is regarded as a time for figuring out how their emerging identities and future life work can be relevant for and living out their faith commitments.

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5 Universities, through campus ministries, student affairs, and academic coursework in religion offer venues for theological exploration of their vocations. For example, see “Lily Endowment Initiative Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation,” July 2, 2013, [http://www.ptev.org](http://www.ptev.org) (accessed June 30, 2013).
It seems that theological exploration of one’s work and the bringing of spirituality into the workplace are privileges afforded to those with the advantages of higher education and work deemed vocation-worthy by salary, service, or its required education preparation. Such privileges point to, and at times may work to maintain, the structural inequalities in North America’s winner or achievement-oriented work culture where dignity becomes a contest and the criteria for determining degrees of a person’s worth based on work are controlled by the economic top tier.\(^6\) In her project on the lived faith of welfare mothers, Susan Crawford Sullivan has noted that in this growing interest of bringing faith into the workplace, no attention is given to the role of faith in the types of low-paying or low-skills jobs that poor mothers hold.\(^7\) This neglect continues in theological and sociological scholarship despite studies showing that the poor do find their workplace, even with difficult work environments or menial tasks, to be a significant location for living out a calling and expressing their faith commitments (Sullivan 2011 96-107; Frederick 2003 109-114).

\textit{Contributor} vendors, working on their feet for hours while outside in all kinds of weather to make 75 cents a paper, have employment that many could describe as carrying little intrinsic value or dignity and might not be regarded as “normal” work that people

\(^6\) Sample makes this point and suggest that our winning oriented culture or “religion of winning” maintains its status quo as we internalize the idea that losing (losing employment or holding a ‘loser’ job) is the individual’s fault. Tex Sample, \textit{Doing Ministry with Working Class Whites: Blue Collar Resistance and the Politics of Jesus} (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 23, 57.

\(^7\) Sullivan, \textit{Lived Faith}, 95. Also, at the 2013 Society for Pastoral Theology conference, Jill Snodgrass shared her unpublished work on providing a vocational discernment program for recently incarcerated women in Baltimore.
are “called” to do. However, a number of vendors say their work has meaning in their delivering a message that breaks down stigmas attached to homelessness particularly in the stereotype of the homeless panhandler, from which they want distance both for their own self-identities and their Contributor work. Repeatedly, I heard vendors like Deb and Mario say, “I’ve been brought here to let people know we are not just panhandlers just because we’re homeless. This is my job, just like the retailers around me” or “God led me here to teach the public that we are more than panhandlers. We want to work.”

Contributor vendors like these may feel an urgency to deliver this message because for the past five years, panhandling has been targeted as a criminal activity by Nashville and five surrounding Middle Tennessee cities. Their bans limited the time and place of panhandling: one could beg during day hours at least 25 feet away from an automated teller machine or bank entrance and at least 10 feet away from any entrance or exit of a public building. These bans reflect a recent national trend: in 2006, the National Coalition for the Homeless released a survey of 224 American cities that found a significant increase toward criminalizing behaviors associated with the homeless. Even before Nashville passed its ban barring aggressive panhandling downtown in 2008, downtown police officers were ordered to patrol the streets in plain clothes and pose as tourists in order to better enforce “quality of life” crimes. They made more than 600

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9 Of the surveyed cities, 45% had passed laws banning aggressive panhandling, 43% outlawed begging in particular public places, and 21% had citywide bans on panhandling. Jennifer Brooks, “Council Approves Ban on Aggressive Panhandling,” Jan. 15, 2008.
arrests in a five-month period. In Murfreesboro, panhandling citations within the first
four months of 2013 already matched the number of citations issued in 2012.
Murfreesboro Police Department spokesman, Kyle Evans said that the town was
increasing officer enforcement on this code because panhandlers created safety issues by
obstructing users of a public street and “attempting to take advantage of our community’s
generosity.”

Nashville’s defense attorneys and social workers have criticized this method of
going homeles persons off the streets by arresting them for nonviolent crimes
(trespassing or blocking doorways and sidewalks, for instance) that include panhandling.
They have made an economic argument for it: a night in jail costs the city 65 dollars
while a night in A Room in the Inn’s Guest House, which has invited the police to bring
them homeles on nonviolent arrests, costs the city 14 dollars. Other homeless
advocates have argued that fining and arresting the homeless (who may miss court dates
which lead to arrest warrants and more jail time and court costs) under these “quality of
life” ordinances only perpetuates homelessness. They also point to Nashville’s high
recidivism rate: by Metro police figures, 328 people arrested for the quality of life
ordinances had a combined record of nearly 10,000 arrests from June to Dec 2007. In
short, this movement of criminalizing homeless behavior in the greater Nashville area

12 Gail Kerr, “Nashville’s Homeless Need.”
13 Staff Writer, “Homeless Advocates Call Fines.”
provided one catalyst for the formation of the Contributor that aimed to offer homeless persons the chance to be microbusiness persons; if they were going to be outside and near public places, here was a dignified alternative for making money and breaking down homeless stereotypes among the public, and hopefully preventing further codification of anti-panhandling ordinances based on stigmatized views of the homeless. Now, through their work, many vendors feel called to teach the public that, as Sharon said, “the homeless are more than panhandlers and are human, too.”

Curiously, when homeless persons I interviewed explained why they did not work for the Contributor, they insisted that vending was no different from panhandling. Among the 40 homeless I interviewed, only one shared that he begs. The rest, without my initiating the subject, at some point in their interviews made sure I knew that they “would never have their hand out” for money or “beg on the corner.” Panhandling is one form of shadow work, or work that falls outside the bounds of normal employment, such as recycling, plasma donation, or day labor. Because of a criminal record or a lack of a solid work history, education, or permanent address, the homeless may find themselves doing shadow work and so acting as bricoleurs, improvising with whatever work is at hand to fit one’s shifting needs for immediate survival.¹⁴ Unlike some shadow work, panhandling seems to be a cardinal sin among those I interviewed. Begging carries a stigma that one is inherently lazy or lacks a work ethic, an anathema in North America’s competitive worldview endorsing the American Dream and individual effort and

Kenny Bill, who attends the Wednesday worship service and the Living Room said, “You know you’ve really hit rock bottom when you panhandle. I may pick cigarette butts off the street to make a cigarette—and that’s low—but I’ll never put my hand out. It’s just too shaming.”

The growing trend to criminalize panhandling and the contempt for it among the homeless I encountered highlights the stigmatization of the homeless linked to begging. Ethnographic studies of homeless panhandlers show they develop various deflective strategies to manage the stigma and deal with what Goffman called “nonperson treatment” as well as direct judgmental treatment (Lankenau 1999a, 1999b). In Fear of Beggars, ethicist Kelly Johnson points out the visceral response domiciled people have not just to the appearance or stench of panhandlers from street life, but to the act of begging itself that has made almsgiving, a traditional pious practice, less than virtuous:

The sight of a stranger asking for help outside the public order of rights and the private affection of family shakes us. Uncertainty about the beggar’s honesty and civility, concern that giving alms to one somehow makes things worse for others or may lead to endless demands, and knowledge that the ‘pittance’ given is ineffective… Facing beggars we fear poverty, we fear conflict, we fear drowning in the demands that may arise if we open ourselves to the needs of others, we fear the entanglements of gratitude. We fear to be the family of the poor because we fear becoming poor.”

Interacting with beggars, says Johnson, can be uncomfortable because it raises our awareness of these complexities. In fact some of these same complicated difficulties in

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the fearful interactions with beggars still are present on both sides of the “mixed contacts” (Goffman 1963: 8) that the Contributor vendors face in their daily work.

As many vendors articulate feeling called to their work, some vendors consider writing articles for the paper as a part of this calling. Three in particular—Gary, Anita, and Chris—turn to writing to voice their message and view their writing as an expression of faith in God, even ordained by God in God’s great plan to deliver the extreme poor.

Gary began vending for the Contributor in Sept 2010 when construction work was harder to find and describes having a “mission” for writing in the paper:

I feel like I have a mission to help the homeless, and at least join the conversation in my articles and when I sell the papers to my customers. Everyone out in this world is somebody—somebody’s son, daughter, brother, sister, mother, or father. The poor often get lost in the shuffle and have no advocates. Everybody is somebody and deserves to be taken care of by society. Half the time I give articles away because I just want them read. I want to shout to the world, ‘Hey, come read, here’s how I feel,’ you know?

Gary shares a kind of commissioning story akin to Martin Luther on how he became an advocate for the homeless:

The Lord told me along time ago when I first became homeless and was leaving the Mission, out of a job, and didn’t know how I’d pay rent again. It was raining and lightning and after a bolt ripped through the sky I said, ‘What now, Lord?’ He said, ‘You’ll be a homeless advocate.’ I didn’t even know what that word meant. I had to go look it up in the library—it is one who speaks for another. And I’m speaking for another to those who don’t get it yet. And I said, ‘I can do that.’ I may be holding the pen but the Good Lord is doing the writing—and He’s doing the selling. I really believe that. I’m not promoting being homeless but the issues and how hard it is to be out on the streets. People need to know we’re somebody, too.

To the modern ear trained to listen in a post-Enlightenment world, Gary’s description of his audible experience of God’s voice as a call can arouse suspicion. It might strike
many as “whacko” or as fraudulent spiritual experience.\(^{17}\) Gary’s auditory experience of God’s beckoning has early modern American Christian precedents found in the “drawings” of Quaker John Woolman and the “extraordinary” or “immediate calls” of Methodist itinerant preachers like Jarena Lee and Ebenezer Newell, and even the more recent Pentecostal preacher Oral Roberts (Schmidt 2000 38-44, 76). For Gary, God speaks with a directness that is transformative because it gives his life some purpose: he will advocate for the homeless so that people who need to get this message from God will come to realize that the homeless are “somebodies.”

Anita, who is formerly homeless and has been vending for about three years, talks about her work with the street paper in light of her favorite bible verse, Jeremiah 29.11: “For know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” She peppers her conversation with this verse as she explains excitedly that God has called her to be a “healer” and “feeder to those in need.” One way she heals and feeds is by “getting the word out on the streets.” Anita says one of her most important pieces was a letter she wrote to the city called “Stop the Violence.” After working for the paper for almost a year, she was able to get

\(^{17}\) As Tom Paine, the revolutionary writer said, “I totally disbelieve that the Almighty ever did communicate anything to man, by any mode of speech, in any language, or by any kind of vision.” Found in Leigh Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2000), 6. Schmidt takes on the subject of the religious struggles of enchantment and disenchantment for modern voices and hearing. His book explores the retraining of the modern ear to no longer hear God’s voice in the world and how this intersects with disciplines of bodies, senses, and the mind in supporting public values, proper decorum, and political order. He traces this to modern religious experiences of hearing things, which increasingly became discounted as hallucinations, diseases, or mental illness warranting asylum stays.
housing, but she soon discovered it was dangerous. Anita laughs, “I thought I’d feel safer once I finally got my own place and then I get in a place where there are shootings. Come on now. Where’s the sense in that?”

When a child was shot on her street, Anita felt compelled to speak out about the violence she was experiencing: “I think of my own six grandsons. We can’t let that happen to babies. We all deserve more. We forget how much power God has given us over our enemies and my way is with the paper and getting the word out,” said Anita. The Contributor gives Anita a forum where she can voice her indignation over the dangers that formerly homeless persons face when their options for low-income housing do little to help them find a place that does not feel significantly safer than the open streets. In writing her letter, Anita seems to be practicing righteous discontent, an activity Marla Frederick identified among poor black women in rural North Carolina who channel their dissatisfaction with poor education and living conditions into public action and networking (Frederick 2003, 92-121).

Anita declares, “I got my sword in my hand and all along I see His Mighty Hand.” In writing articles like this one, Anita is motivated by her care for others, like those in her neighborhood, her grandsons, and the other street paper vendors who could be facing a similar predicament. She is also motivated to care for herself and see herself as deserving of a safe place. Anita understands her writing articles about social injustices for the extreme poor as her part in a fight against evil and an expression of her faith in God, the God of the Exodus. Just as God was a divine warrior delivering the Hebrew slaves from Egypt, so would God today with her and other homeless and formerly homeless persons
in violent low income housing situations. Although her letter did not make a difference among city law and policy makers, the street paper gave her a place to publicly voice her discontent, and the publication did help her get out of her lease with her landlord. She showed him the letter and told him that one of her paper customers had helped her to find another place to live. In an act of what she calls “God’s unmerited favor,” her landlord agreed to let her out of her lease and she is now living two streets away, but the distance is enough for her to feel safer.

Finally, Chris, too, sees himself living out a vocational calling in his writing poems for the Contributor. Like Anita, Chris turns to scripture to interpret his street paper work being a part of God’s plan. Instead of reading his work through the lens of Jeremiah, he goes to Philippians 1.6, “He who began a good work in you will carry it out until the day of completion in Christ Jesus.” Chris explains, “God started this work of the street paper for the homeless and is going to carry it on in me.” Chris writes because he is convinced that poetry “can make a difference and persuade people to change their minds about who the homeless are.” Chris attributes his poetry with the reason for why non-homeless persons eventually came to accept his vendor presence on their street.

When Chris first started selling the paper in Berry Hill in front of McDonald’s, he says people were unsure about him. The police were called, but when they tried to chase him away, he opened the paper and showed them some of his poetry about homeless life. “They changed their mind about me,” says Chris, “and no other cop touched me again after that because nobody writes like me.”
Chris sees his writing for the *Contributor* as prophetic: “Am I prophet? Yes, I am. I am giving them words God tells me to share with them so they can change in how they see us and treat us.” Indeed, if one function of the Old Testament prophet and Jesus’s prophetic work in the New Testament is to show people of their need to repent—the Hebrew, *shuv*, literally means to turn, to re-turn to God and to change one’s mind, actions and orientation—then Chris, Gary and Anita, I think, are doing a prophet’s work as they ask people to re-orient how they view and treat the extreme poor as more than matter out of place.

These three vendors see writing as a key part of their vending because it gives them a chance to express their faith and use what they think is a gift from God on behalf of the homeless. Gary and Chris particularly think their writing can make a difference in moving non-homeless customers to perceive the homeless as more than transgressors to be ignored or removed. However, when I consider why I buy the paper and what I hear in casual conversations from other non-homeless customers buying the paper, it is not for the reading material. Were the paper simply put into vending machines all over town, I doubt the *Contributor* would still be the highest selling street paper in the nation. As Mario says while pointing his hands to his body, “*We* are the product. It’s not just the newspaper. It’s me. They see me. People remember me.”\(^{18}\) Mario is right. The bodily presence of the vendors is why many non-homeless Nashvillians feel compelled to consistently buy the papers. (Why else would some buy repeatedly the same paper from

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\(^{18}\) Actually, Mario continues to talk about his dogs being seen and remembered here as well. Mario brings his pets with him to sell papers. I will take them up in the next chapter because Mario takes pictures of his dogs as bringing him into God’s presence.
one or multiple vendors?) Being on the city streets, contesting their right to be working in its “prime space” (Snow and Anderson 1993), and challenging the non-homeless to pay attention to them and the problems of homelessness—this embodied word is what can convert people’s stigmatized views of the homeless.

Their continued embodied presence in the prime spaces of Nashville can also bring a conversion of deeply ingrained bodily habituations of both the homeless and non-homeless. Friendly waving and smiling are mentioned by vendors as successful paper selling practices. Mario explains: “I’ve got to market myself and be polite. I make eye contact, but I don’t stare. I’ll wave sometimes, but I stand back as a common courtesy.” Mario, like many vendors, takes on a greeter role of pleasant politeness.¹⁹ This is encouraged by staff and long time vendors at orientation meetings.

Consider the experience of Richard in his vendor greeting ritual and how he perceives this kind of posture “just having respect and confidence for myself.” A single 43-year-old African American man from Spring Hill, Richard has been working at the Contributor for over two years and selling in West Nashville spots near Vanderbilt University. For the past twenty years, Richard has been through periods of homelessness, incarceration, and he has made repeated attempts to get clean from a long standing substance addiction at halfway house-rehabilitation programs. He has found housing largely by living with women, but he has never married or had children. Richard listed several of his jobs to me—day labor work, dishwashing, motel cleaning, carwash

¹⁹ One commonality vending has with panhandling is the choice of greeter role as one possible way to initiate contact with potential customers. Lankenau, “Panhandling Repertoires,” 1999a; Lankenau, “Stronger than Dirt,” 1999b.
detailing, seasonal Opryland cashier—and said he jumped from one to another, “not wanting to work because I had learned the street way.” The past few months Richard has been participating in another halfway house rehabilitation program sponsored by a local Nazarene church.

As Richard shares how much he loves selling the paper where he “feels like a real working person,” he talks about his favorite aspect of vending:

Just getting to make so many relationships and meet so many people out here. And getting to be a productive member of society. See, with my background, I’m not used to all of this. It feels weird, man. I’m not used to doing this [smiling and waving] on the street and sure not used to people smiling and waving back. I’m used to…well, you know. God has so blessed me with all of this.

For Richard, then vending is meaningful work because it gives him the feeling of being a “real” person who has employment where he is recognized as having his own place of use among the normal workforce. Vending is also meaningful for him because it gives him the opportunity to engage in non-stigmatizing face-to-face interactions that may also afford him some sense of community. Significantly, he admits that he feels “weird” and is unaccustomed to feeling in-place with steady work and also with being in contact with persons who return it with friendliness rather than fear. If Richard’s extreme poverty habituated him to a vague “well, you know,” perhaps meaning an expectation of aversion or looks of disgust or contempt, vending provides him with occasions to experience in his body friendliness. Richard would rather not fully articulate that and instead turns his attention to the source of his feeling in-place with his new bodily gestures and face-to-face encounters: the divine.
Richard then explains how vending, with his changed interactions with non-homeless and his new pride in his work is transforming him into a useful, compassionate moral self he most yearns to be and to be known as by others:

I want to be a productive member of society. Might sound crazy but that’s what I desire and I feel it out here. I desire not to be on the streets, not to have all the drugs, be a dope dealer, get DUI’s. I don’t want to be known as that. I want to be known as a good guy, a caring guy, a kind, loving guy, you know what I’m saying? A guy who looks out for others. Out here I have that and I’ve discovered that, Being out here has helped with that, so I smile. I can’t help but smile and smile when I’m out here. It’s like a beautiful thing. I could be depressed, but soon as I’m out here, like sunshine in my life.

Unlike a couple of vendors who reported that they paste on a smile because they know it can increase their sales and found it wearisome at times, Richard seems genuinely happy and grateful for a chance to get off the streets. Interestingly, this means more to Richard then actually selling papers because “a great job” for him is less about selling a certain number of papers and more about friendly face-to-face encounters.

Goffman said it is the small often overlooked bodily movement and gestures that can be most telling of dynamics underlying social interactions as well as in the creating of the social self.20 As Richard enacts these ordinary, seemingly empty gestures of smiling and waving, he receives encouragement and praise for his confident posture that help him feel like he is shedding stigmas attached with homelessness, unemployment, and drug-addiction and he is changing into the person he longs to be. Work and positive personal interactions, provided by God, bring Richard a new found sense of dignity and reassure him of his potential for change, all of which creates in him an empathetic desire to help others in need:

20 Goffman, Interaction Ritual, 91.
People, they will roll down their windows and sometimes they will buy the paper, but that doesn’t matter. The thing is, is they will compliment me. They compliment me on my smile, on how I carry myself. They think I do a great job. You know when I said that I want to become a productive member of society? That right there lets me know I’m becoming that, you know what I’m saying? I don’t even know some of the people who tell me these things but for them to see me like that each day and for them to say “We love your smile” and “We love the way you carry yourself” it helps me forget about my past, lets me know I am headed in the right direction. If I’m ever able to help anyone, I’m willing to do it because the paper has changed me.

Part of Richard’s feeling unhabituated to “mixed contacts” (Goffman 1963 14) where non-homeless strangers greet him with openness and respect is the new experience of trusting and being trusted by domiciled strangers. Richard talked about how customers will warn him if another vendor from The Contributor or another publication is selling on his vending turf while he is gone. Nearby Hillsboro Village merchants, he says, know who he is and trust him to come in and use their bathrooms instead of accusing him of loitering and threatening to call the police. The trust is mutual, for he says that they know he is watching out for them. He described how he mediated between a “shady” loiterer and one “scared” merchant and was able to peaceably convince the loiterer that he had to leave. Even the police, he says, trust him and have asked him to let them know if he has problems with anyone or sees anything suspicious. “Ain’t nobody ever told me that,” Richard laughed, “I was like, ‘somebody set me up, I better run and was looking around,’ when the cops told me they wanted my help and had my back. It’s like that, for real.” In a word, customers, nearby business owners, and civil authorities are coming to view that the homeless and formerly homeless vendors are “contributors” who can contribute not just to the economy with honest employment but to society in being persons trusted to help keep communities safe.
As I listened to Richard, I thought back to Clarke’s situational analysis work and her warning to ethnographers to pay attention to “sites of silence” or what is left unspoken that may be as important as what subjects choose to share (Clarke 2005 85). In Richard’s descriptions of these “mixed contacts,” race went unmentioned. I wondered if Richard’s earlier vague “well, you know” and reticence to speak more concretely about what he was accustomed to facing in interactions with non-homeless persons and the police included an element of race. Perhaps my own whiteness was a barrier Richard considered in not including the color of these persons involved.

Another vendor, John, had openly and quickly named race as an issue for him in his life of poverty. A 65-year-old African American man from Nashville, John participated in the Civil Rights Movement with the sit-ins at downtown stores and his church, Jefferson Street Baptist. As John was naming his seventh grade education as one reason for his homelessness, he patted his cheek and said, “this, too, is a strike against me and you know what that is. They call me everything. Mostly white people, they call me boy, Leroy, and you know what else. No. My name is John.” Interestingly, a Contributor vendor, an African American man from Chicago, shared a story similar to Richard’s about gaining the trust of civil authorities and non-homeless strangers, but his story included race:

A white officer said he appreciated me, ‘You’re like one of us,’ he said, ‘We can’t see everything and I know if you see something on this corner you’ll tell us.’ Well, an old woman with Alzheimer’s came up to me and was lost and I told her, ‘You’re a senior citizen and you’re white, so the police will take care of you.’ I got a white customer to call the police for her. I thought the old woman might trust her—she was white and had a car, and sure enough, she helped her find her house. I know the police say we vendors do and see things they’d miss. And I did that.
Perhaps this vendor felt comfortable to talk about race because he shared this in a Living 
Room meeting where more than half the room was black, including two group leaders. 
Further, what he divulges is of interest in revealing a real risk homeless and formerly 
homeless African American vendors may feel they take when they participate in “mixed 
contacts.” When this vendor found himself in a situation where he could care for the 
older senile woman, he chose to help a vulnerable person in need, but only indirectly 
through another white woman. The elderly woman’s whiteness—and perhaps her being a 
woman—took him to a the more deeply habituated response of fear in which he was not 
willing to risk directly helping her by calling the police himself. 

The point I have been working to make here is this: the street paper sells not so 
much because of the written words in the paper but because of the embodied presence of 
the homeless vendors on the street. Through personal interactions fostered by their 
greeting rituals, their bodies on street corners, day in an day out, that have been 
accustomed to feeling invisible, different, or feared can take in new experiences of 
feeling in-place and dignity. Granted, this is not the case for all vendors.21 However, for 
some, like Richard, such a change in his bodily gestures and how he is positively 
received gives him hope for transforming himself into a productive working man and one 
clean from substance abuse. Moreover, all of this—the opportunity for honest steady 

21 One, Lisa, who no longer vends for the street paper said that after a few months of this 
work, she was leaving it because she found it shameful and felt exposed to unfriendly 
stares from drivers. She also felt exposed in her mapped area near an interstate where she 
says she has feared for her safety both from non-homeless male drivers and male vendors 
who challenged her for her “turf.”
work, for being seen with dignity in face-to-face encounters, and for being treated as trustsorthy—is perceived by Richard as a gift from God. Although Richard does not speak of race, other African American vendors do speak of it in terms of a stigmatizing factor in their experiences of poverty and a perceived gamble in their willingness to trust and be in relationship with white customers and authorities.

The work of vending provides not just the homeless with opportunities to change their own deeply engrained habits of fear and avoidance but also with opportunities to convert the non-homeless in their own visceral responses of fear and avoidance and any stigmatized perceptions of the homeless. To this end, some vendors, like Richard interpret their vending as street preaching. “I’m a corner minister,” he says:

A lot of people when I first came out here and they see me on the block they wouldn’t wave, wouldn’t smile. I could hear them lock the doors, see them turn the other way, and I always keep smiling and waving alright. Those people, who turned their heads or locked or wouldn’t speak or smile back, look at what they doing today. They open up their doors. They roll down their windows. They will talk my ear off. I could have my back turned and they’ll blow their horn now. I’m a corner minister. You know God is working me toward them to get them to get it. You know, really see us out here making something of ourselves and not gonna do something bad to them.

Richard has previously said that the non-homeless in their open responses have helped him to “get it” in seeing himself as more than a drug-addict who can’t hold down a job. However, he admits that this openness did not just naturally happen. For Richard, his daily presence as a vendor is a kind of preaching to the non-homeless to “get it,” to understand the truth that they don’t need to be scared of him or ignore him. Richard had to practice persistence and patience in what he describes as a wearing down of the non-
homeless habitus of distrust with his continued greeting posture that, with enough repetition, he thinks retrained them to respond to him differently.\textsuperscript{22}

Additionally, part of Richard’s preaching is reminding some of his non-homeless customers to practice gratitude and realize how much they have. He recounts how one woman complained to him about the summer heat and her house bills she had to pay. He shares his response to her and how he thinks God brought him to give her a word that would turn her to realize what she has and feel gratitude:

I asked her, ‘Well, what if you didn’t have a home, a job, didn’t have bills for your home? Would you like to have that?’ And ever since I told her that, when she comes, she rolls down her window and asks me how am I doing and I say, ‘I’m awesome how you? I’m great.’ But the first time, now don’t forget, she was complaining ‘I’m so tired and blah blah blah,’ and I’m like ‘Well, I’ve been out there and I’ve got my hat on,’ and you should see the look on her face. Now she’s all, ‘I’m doing this and that, and it’s all good.’ I think that God spoke through me to her. Yeah, a lotta people in the world today who would want to be in my position even out here and they can’t be so don’t complain about it. It’s all a gift from God to start with, a blessing, you know what I’m saying? I mean my life today compared to a few years back, it’s not perfect, don’t get me wrong, I gotta a whole lot of growing to do, but I realize if it weren’t for God… He brought me to probation out here selling. I could be killed, strung out, but no, now God is showing me what life is really all about. God blessed me with this work so I let people know.

For Richard, being a vendor is more than a job to help him get out of homelessness; he thinks God has brought him to this work in part to preach a word to some customers that

\textsuperscript{22} In vending, Richard is putting to practice some of the same emotional management skills that panhandlers must use to deflect exclusionary or judgmental gestures and statements by the non-homeless. Lankenau makes the point that panhandling requires emotion management skills. As beggars have shaming encounters, they survive by practicing patience and learning to control any anger they might feel in the moment. Lankenau, “Panhandling Repertoires,” 1999a; Lankenau, “Stronger than Dirt,” 1999b.
helps them recognize their own blessings and feel thanks for what they have, as he does for his street paper selling and life out of probation.

Like Richard, others also see themselves as preachers who are bringing a message of conversion to the non-homeless to see them and make room for them as microbusinessmen with a right to be in Nashville’s “prime spaces.” Chris calls himself “a messenger of God” in his vending. Homeless now for almost ten years, Chris lives alone in his camp in the woods of Fort Negley, a downtown park. In explaining what he hopes to convey with his presence on the Nashville streets, he quotes one of his poems alluding to scripture, “entertaining angels—they can’t always see the angel by their side, but I am here.” To call his work’s purpose “entertaining angels” implies a knowledge of the Genesis 18 story of Abraham and Sarah hosting the three strangers while unaware of their angelic messenger status and receiving the good news of a son after showing them hospitality. Chris understands himself as doing God’s bidding by interrupting habits of strangerliness for those who have eyes to see the angel on the street, that is, for those who practice hospitality in making room for Chris to appear before them as more than a homeless person and interact with him. Further, Chris perceives his divinely appointed work to be making a difference for the ongoing lawsuit in Brentwood where Contributor vendors have been banned: “I’m not going anywhere. I’m staying put and the more I do that and others do that every day, and I’m talking it up to my customers too, well that can maybe help Brentwood to see us and let us come back.”

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23 As I mentioned in Chapter 2, The wealthy Nashville suburban area of Brentwood banished Contributor vendors in the spring of 2011. For weeks they had stood on
Billy is more direct than Chris in explaining that his street corner preaching is meant to educate the public about the homeless and deconstruct negative stereotypes. Billy is a 26-year-old white man from Virginia who has been homeless off and on since running away from an abusive home as a teenager. After staying at the Mission, he has found housing for the past three months in a trailer park with his wife as well as a part-time job at Home Depot; he attributes both gains to working for the Contributor. Billy shares, “I hate the stigma some people give the paper.” Sighing, he corrects himself, “no it’s not really the paper, it’s us selling the paper. Some people can be so close-minded about us and yell, ‘Get a real job.’ I hear at a lot. At least once a day. But, you know, my spot feels liberating to me. It’s helping me care for those I love.” Billy says those taunts provide the opportunity for conversations where he speaks back: “I have a guardian spirit, roadsides and medians to sell their papers to motorists, but stayed away when Brentwood police issued citations and fines to eight vendors for breaking city code not allowing for sales in the public right of way. The vendors said they were on public sidewalks and were not obstructing the flow of traffic and paid their fines. Top city officials in both cities said the issue was safety for both motorists and vendors and that they had received complaints from motorists. Claiming that this deprived them of their First Amendment right to free speech, The Contributor with the help of the ACLU has filed a civil rights lawsuit in Nashville’s U.S. District Court against Brentwood. This sort of showdown between the homeless paper vendors and these two greater Nashville area cities echoes the “NIMBY” mentality seen in my analysis of the place of homeless shelters and Tent City in Chapter 1. Brentwood’s actions indicate that the wealthy suburb was unaccustomed to and uncomfortable by this presence of poverty (According to 2005-2009 U.S. Census Bureau estimates, only 1.4 percent of the city’s families are below the poverty level and its median income is three times the state median.) and did not want homeless persons hanging around in their neighborhoods. Brentwood. See, Gail Kerr, “Brentwood Cares More about its own Looks than the Homeless: Commentary,” The Tennessean, July 3, 2011; Kevin Walters, “Cities Banish Sidewalk Vendors,” The Tennessean, April 26, 2011; Becca Andrews, “Homeless Paper sues Brentwood,” The Tennessean, June 30, 2011.
my grandma always said. I care about my customers but I’ll also watch out for us vendors and speak up.” He compares his “guardian spirit” to Abraham in Genesis who, Billy explains, was called by God to bless others by guarding or looking out for them.

While standing at the Green Hills McDonald’s at the end of the drive-thru line, a man in a construction truck told him to “stop begging and get a real job.” Billy asked him if his construction company was hiring anyone. When the man said the economy was too bad for hiring, Billy replied, “Well how do you expect someone else to be hiring if you can’t? I want to work. At least I’m working and doing a legitimate job.” According to Billy, the man had no reply but the next day, he came back and bought a paper from him and became a regular customer.

Billy explains what happened in that interaction: “This is my message I’m preaching. I opened up his mind, cause like I said, or really, it’s like God said, ‘Open your eyes and ears and see and listen.’” Bill points to his eyes and ears for emphasis and continues, “There is a lot of hypocrisy…this is the buckle of the bible belt and they say here they are such god fearing people but they don’t listen to the basic things that God and Jesus said about helping the needy and loving your neighbor.” Billy sees himself acting out his faith in his vending that accomplishes God’s work of transforming the non-homeless persons’ sinful misperceptions of the homeless. Through personal conversation, Billy hopes to remove stigmas attached to homelessness, particularly about an inherent laziness or lack of work ethic among the poor, a stereotype that can be used to justify thinking of the poor as deserving or wanting to be in poverty. All of this is framed as standing up for and caring for his fellow vendors, as he sees himself uniquely suited to
do this work with his “guardian spirit.” He calls this his “preaching” to many whom he
deems religious hypocrites for judging the homeless rather than following Jesus and God by helping those in need.

Vendors like Richard, Chris, and Billy, see themselves as delivering a word from God in their work and experience their work as sites of lived faith through their street preaching. Street preaching has a varied tradition within the history of Christianity: from early church naked street preachers to itinerant Franciscans and Poor Clares such as Angelina of Montegiove to early African American Methodists like Jarena Lee. As I mentioned in chapter 2, downtown Nashville is no stranger to street preaching, as the riverfront streets in the 19th and 20th centuries were made into pro-prohibition pulpits by Salvation Army soldiers and new converts of revivals, like Tom Ryman. The tradition of street preaching has been used by homiletican Chuck Campbell in his urging seminary students to risk leaving the church buildings with their preaching. Campbell calls street preaching a kind of “extreme homiletics” that takes proclamation outside of the traditional pulpit to offer a public witness of the gospel for the homeless.

Campbell has held up the early church naked street preacher or holy fool as one helpful model for today’s ministers. The holy fool image finds its origins in Jesus’ own

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ministry and cross, deemed foolish and weak by worldly standards. A preacher who is a “holy fool for Christ” offers a message “scandalous and foolish when measured by the standard of human culture.”

Naked street preachers, such as Basil the Blessed, “engaged in an intentional, carefully orchestrated kind of street theater” where, through their own bodily exposure, they meant to expose sinful social hierarchies and startle people into seeing their complicity in the world’s wealth and power (Campbell 2010, 97). As such, Campbell concludes that naked street preachers act as sacred jesters or holy fools in their rejection of clothes to declare their freedom from the very unjust social inequities represented when wearing them. Campbell’s Christological interpretation of naked street preachers links their embodied sign-acts to the crucified Jesus whose public crucifixion is a kind of act of naked street preaching that disarms imperial powers of violence out in the open and unmasks them as powers for death, not life (99).

Obviously, Contributor vendors are not selling the papers in nakedness nor are they by any means trying to valorize poverty or call people to a life of poverty. Still, the early Christian naked street preachers and holy fool tradition speak to their work. Vendors are naked in the sense that they are without property, wealth, academic learning, social and political power, and often ties to family and other forms of social bonds. Vendors are a kind of holy fool because they daily put their bodies in “prime spaces” (Snow and Anderson 1993) and so are displaying such weaknesses in order to lay bare the real problems of homelessness and invite people to see and interact with them beyond

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homelessness’ attached stigmas. In fact, one message a few vendors feel like they are meant to give to non-homeless customers is one that reminds them of their shared humanity in all its frailties and vulnerabilities. Jimmy and Annie, who say they fell into homelessness with lay-offs from work, mounting health care bills from Jimmy’s heart surgery, and difficulties with mental health services, think their homeless presence on their street corner reminds passerbys, “This could happen to you, too. You might just be one paycheck or medical bill away from losing it all.” Such a message, as Kelly Johnson said, is one non-homeless persons don’t like to be reminded and may explain their fear of beggars: “We fear to be the family of the poor because we fear becoming poor” (2011, 5).

Moreover, like the early church naked street preachers, Contributor vendors aim to bring “a crisis of recognition or decision” for onlookers and startle the church back into its calling (Campbell 2010, 99) not by stripping bare but by putting their homeless bodies on display to remind persons of their shared humanity. Anita through her articles, Chris through his poetry and presence, Richard through his smile and wave, and Billy through a spoken retort see themselves performing the good news in their work.

To draw on two of Christine Smith’s own preaching categories, in various aspects of their work, the Contributor vendors are providing a witness of truth-telling, be it in Richard’s truth about cultured bodily habituations in need of change or in Gary’s truth that the homeless are more than nobodies, as well as resistance to broken social structures, be it in Anita’s letter about poor living conditions or Chris’s own part in
helping Brentwood to change its exclusionary practices. Such truth telling and resistance in their work engenders hope; as Gary puts it: “I feel like I am supposed to turn this negative, this street crap, into a positive. What was meant for death and destruction should show life and production.” Further, such truth telling and resistance is authorized by God who, as some experience, has called these vendors to their work not just as street paper sellers but as street preachers, prophets, advocates, and teachers.

In their street preaching, vendors sometimes use signs or props to get across their message. Old Testament prophets used symbol or sign acts to communicate God’s word to Israel. In performing sign acts, the prophet initiates a future event of hope or judgment that is already present in the sign act: Elijah places his mantle on Elisha to invest him with the office of prophecy (1 Kings 19.19-21); Isaiah walks around naked and barefoot for three years to signal the humiliation Ethiopia and Egypt will experience in exile (Isaiah 20.1-6); Jeremiah buys a field in Anathoth to give the Babylonian exiles hope for their future return home (Jer. 32); and, Ezekiel shaves, lights fire to, and scatters the hair from his beard to show what will happen to the Judeans scattered after the fall of Jerusalem (Ezekiel 3). As evidenced here from just a few of the many Old Testament prophetic sign acts, the proclamation of God’s word always involves the personal participation of the prophet. Their very bodies participate in the sign-act itself, as do their personal lives, be it Jeremiah living in celibacy as a sign of Judah’s impending national

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disaster with Babylon (Jer. 16.1-5) or Hosea marrying Gomer, a whore as a sign of God’s marriage to an unfaithful Israel (Hosea 3). Often, the prophet used props, such as removing his loincloth to walk naked, like Isaiah, or burying and ruining a loincloth, like Jeremiah, imitating God’s ruin of Israel, which refuses to cling to God (Jer.13).

I mention these biblical sign acts of the prophets because not only do the Contributor vendors use their bodies as a part of their own prophetic sign-act that both judges those stigmatizing the homeless and holds out hope for the homeless to break those stereotypes and move out of poverty, but a few vendors use props to convey a message of faith. Two vendors, Sandy and Billy, both talked about their work as preaching and have turned to clothes to help perform their message. A 41-year-old white man recently married with two sons, Sandy has been selling the street paper off the interstate for about a year. Two months ago, he moved into a boarding house with his family after their being in different Missions. Sandy intentionally wears t-shirts with some kind of Christian message while he vends.

During our interview, Sandy was wearing a t-shirt that read “Rock Jesus! Go Forth and Rock My Word!” (see figure 5.1)
He told me he has others, his favorite being a John Deere shirt with Jesus hanging from a cross. He looks for Christian t-shirts at Goodwill because he has noticed that it is one way to connect with drivers and grow his customer base. As a business practice, this can be a savvy move for a vendor selling in a Bible Belt city. Sandy says that people will stop and comment and ask about where he goes to church or his life. Sandy adds, “I want to show I love the Lord. I am living proof of God’s power! I’m not ashamed to be a Christian. I am more than a homeless person. I am Christ’s and they can see that instead.” According to Colleen McDannell, one way that some low church Christians, particularly Evangelical and Born Again Protestants, express their religious feelings and spread the good news is by wearing their Christian symbols, bible verses, or beliefs that adapt popular slogans. (For example, “Coke is it” becomes “Christ is it” with a red and white cola swirl.) Sandy is, as McDannell explains, using a visual and tactile object like
a t-shirt that brings an immediacy that ideas often lack. For a potential customer gazing at Sandy’s vendor body, Sandy hopes that his religious t-shirts show his Christian identity that he asserts can trump his homeless identity and stigmas potential customers might attach to it and him. It also testifies to the divine’s power to bring him out of homelessness with his work.

Like Sandy, Billy uses his clothes as a sign to convey his message. Billy first began this practice after experiencing work as “a test of my faith”:

There are times I think God is testing me and I waver. I sold 35 papers without any tips across a period of 12 hours. When you break that down, I made less than minimum wage. I made less than some who work from other countries illegally. Hours not making anything. And the whole time I’m looking at people who have more than enough money to hand me one dollar for a paper and they act like they have nothing on them. To see people who are blessed—I mean, if you can shop at Trader Joe’s [where he sells] you can at least buy the paper.

To go out and try to sell the paper and encounter so many who, as he says, could easily spare a dollar for his paper but don’t; to be working a 12 hour shift outdoors and yet make so little—Billy begins to question, and perhaps to doubt himself, the good of his work, and the good of other people and of God.

Billy responded to his “tests” in a unique way to show he was, as he put it, “keeping faith.” He made a special vendor’s apron that he wears when he works (see figure 5.2). As the figure shows, he wrote on his apron, “Be blessed. Be a blessing. Be the blessing. Bless and be blessed.” Billy explained the bible story behind his apron’s words: “God tells Abraham to be a blessing. I’ve always followed that belief and I just

adopted it here. I remembered it for my apron. And God gave Abraham the strength to keep on in his life. He is giving it to me. And I’m showing people that when I come here day and day out.”

Figure 5.2. Billy’s apron of blessing

When I asked him about what the words on his apron meant to him, he explained the following:

I put ‘Be blessed’ because I want my customers to know I am praying their day to start out and go good. ‘Be a blessing” means, you know, whenever you come in conversation with somebody, if you’re going to be a blessing you’re gonna be nice, kind, caring, understanding. You’re gonna have all these traits that God wants you to have. And then I put ‘Be the blessing” because if you have money, like I’ve had only a dollar in my pocket and someone was hungry, I gave it to them and I’m already poor myself. But when you see people who have more than enough blessings and they don’t, well, they’re not being the blessing God wants. People need to get that.
Christian Scharen has argued that blessing today in North American culture has been thinned out to “God-assured individual happiness.”³⁰ That is, persons have come to expect, given their doing their duty, God cares for their own pursuit of individual happiness. Scharen gives the example of this at work in kitschy signage such as “God bless this cabin.” The conception of God in this logic of blessing is one of “cosmic sugar daddy” who will provide a person with the individual things he or she enjoys as a divine blessing.

Scharen asserts that what is missing from this current understanding of blessing is the crucial assertion of “all creation.” He explains:

“it is not just me standing alone waiting for my blessing...our blessing connects to the need of another...The bible articulates a fundamental commitment on God’s part to those who are poor...Blessings are not merely ‘for us’ or, worse, ‘for me.’ To suggest as much leads us astray, to suppose we are intended to find safe haven in some enclave of the spiritually gifted and blessed. Rather the blessings are always for a larger purpose, which is connected to God’s mission to bless creation.” (83-4).

This more robust and biblically sound notion of blessing that Scharen calls for is one that Billy believes and uses for his apron. Billy does not see God as a divine Santa Claus who will shower good Christians with gifts.³¹ He uses his apron to tell his customers that to have their blessings belong to God’s work, they must belong to or be shared with those in need, like the vendors. Kind treatment and buying a paper for a dollar is enacting blessing and is what God wants, according to Billy, who thinks it is a

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³¹ Billy’s logic of blessing was not shared by all the vendors. For instance, Sharon talked about “my blessing of prosperity” and “God raining down on me the blessing of money” in a way that revealed this individualized notion of blessing that Scharen critiques.
matter of his customers being willing to come from a place of abundance. Interestingly, the same story of Abraham that grounds Billy’s call to vending and inspires his apron message is the one Scharen draws upon to make his theological point about life in the practice of blessing reflecting a “deep Trinitarian pattern of reality…being given and thereby giving: being blessed to be a blessing” (87).

Beyond preaching and sign-acts with clothing, vendors experience their street corner or “worship spot” as a site of lived faith in other ways. Besides a call to deliver a message, they spoke to me of five activities and practices whereby their street corner became imbued with divine presence: God’s provision in a test of faith; wearing significant religious jewelry; being in and blessing nature; singing; and, sounds that evoke memories of loved ones.32

Per my earlier discussion of Billy’s experience of his work as a test of faith, on a good sales day when vendors meet a needed quota, their street corners can become sites of miracles where God provide enough customers giving tips and an emotional lift. Chris excitedly told me of his “miracle” selling at the McDonald’s in Berry Hill when he had to sell 40 papers in order to make his rent on time. By nightfall, he was only half way to his goal when he noticed a customer tipped him with a $20. He did not talk about the customer’s serendipitous generosity but about this being an act of God’s goodness and

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32 The next chapter will be dealing more with how the homeless interpret a space as sacred through the use of visual ethnography and disposable cameras. In chapter six, a couple of the vendors photograph their maps as sacred spaces. However, some who were not a part of these picture taking interviews also discussed in their own interviews how they experienced their maps as sacred spaces (beyond being a site for preaching and teaching), hence my addressing it here as well.
care: “There is God, God is paying half the rent. My Dad is taking care of me. All I have to do is trust and it can be hard but isn’t it cool to see how good God is to us?“

Sandy says that on days when he “feels worried or down,” some of his customers will pull up at those moments and share words of encouragement that he and the customer both understand as messages from God, like, “God told me to tell you how much God loves you” or “God told me to give you this $20 bill three days in a row when I get the paper, and I am finally listening to Him.” Sandy commented about getting tips like this one: “All I got to do is say, ‘God, this is what I need.’ And it comes. If you’ll put $21 in my hand I’ll go home and leave and not feel guilty of something. I make exactly what’s needed for that day—not for everything. I’m not a greedy person. I won’t hoard the manna in the wilderness.” To explain how he understands God’s provision in his precarious work, Sandy draws upon a biblical story of God testing the Israelites’ faith in God as divine provider by sending them bread from heaven with clear instructions to take only what was needed for the day. Those who took more than they needed would be unable to use the bread because it would mold (Exodus 16).

For Sandy, his street corner is a place where God tests his trust and dependency on the divine to sustain him as he journeys through his own wilderness of extreme poverty. He views money from customers as a gift from God and one to be regarded as a gift sufficient unto this day, thereof. Sandy shares that he has made an uncommon practice of leaving his street corner after he has generated only the income that he needs. He reasons that he feel morally obligated not to “hoard the manna” but trust God will provide the next time he goes out to sell.
Being outside for work was mentioned by some as a toll on their bodies and by others as an advantage because they had become habituated to being outdoors and felt more comfortable and free in it. For those in the latter group, some said their street corner became a “worship spot” because they were outdoors rather than inside and working in a building. For instance, George said that he feels close to God because he can see God’s creation in the surrounding yards and well kept lawns of the university across the street. As much as the natural scenery, though, the time of day is important for George who makes a habit of coming early in fall and winter mornings to stand still in the darkness and silence: “Frequently I feel God out here in the mornings before everyone is here. It will be dark for almost an hour and I like to look at the stars and see the sun coming up behind the school and feel God near me in all the quiet. I love the silence and I don’t get a lot of it in my day once the traffic starts coming.” George describes a ritual he sometimes performs after his time with God in silence and solitude. It sounds almost like a rogation blessing of land for its bearing fruit. Sometimes in early still mornings, he likes to walk around his mapped area while praying because he “can ask God to bless my area for that day, the people who will come for their safety, and me with good sales.”

Wearing religious jewelry was another way vendors expressed their faith and marked their work area as sacred. Consider Lisa R. who says that she feel in God’s presence when she sells papers in part because of the simple wooden cross she wears and what it reminds her of. It is not just that it is a cross but how she got it: one of her customer gave it to her when she was baptized—in fact, she says, the customer came to her recent baptism. For Lisa, her baptism marks a moment of her new beginnings—not
just religiously, but a fresh start for her after her husband left her and her son, an act that precipitated her homelessness. Lisa adds that wearing her cross while she sells street papers helps to keep her faith strong because it reminds her that God gave her this job and the customers who care about her. She said she likes to touch it when she talks to God on her corner. When I asked her what she says to God, she replied, “My mom always told me to look up at the sky to talk to God, so I’ll hold it and look up and thank God for what is good in my life and ask God to watch over my customers. Sometimes people will notice and ask and I get to let them know about my faith.

Although Lisa did not directly or explicitly mention this as Sandy did with his religious t-shirts, wearing the cross shows not only that she is a person of faith but a “good” person to be trusted. Further, wearing gifts from customers that they can see being used is one way to demonstrate gratitude to them and to further strengthen a vendor-customer bond. It is one strategy panhandlers have used with their own clientele to create “tie-ins,” successful relationships where there is a sense of loyalty (Lankenau 1999a). But it is more than a savvy business practice; wearing this cross that a customer and now friend has given her can be a tactile reminder of a bit of acceptance and community across class lines that she may experience through vending.

Singing was another activity vendors named as a way to feel close to God while at work. Singing is available to anyone—it’s a simple pleasure that can be enjoyed regardless of one’s social location, as it is here homeless and formerly vendors. In my own driving around West Nashville, I noticed a few vendors singing. One was an African American woman. Her hands with the paper were raised, her eyes partially
closed, her face lifted in song. It was rush hour traffic and I rolled down my window to buy a paper and caught a melody. When I inquired about it, she told me that she sang hymns to the Lord to pass the time on slower days and singing to God helped to keep her mind off her tired feet: “When I sing, I feel light,” she sang to me as she hit a higher note on “light.” Gary also sings hymns and praise songs while working that he learned from being in a choir at Madison Baptist Church in Nashville. He no longer attends or participates in a choir, but he still likes to sing at his spot because “things just seem and feel better.” He insisted that his papers sell better when he sings and sometimes a customer will join him in humming a tune. John, too, likes to sing songs he learned from church choir as a child. (In fact, he sings his responses sometimes at the Living Room meetings, as I discussed his sung lament with Gary at one meeting in Chapter 3.) They bring to mind for him his grandmother and mother who took him and his twelve siblings to Jefferson Street Missionary Baptist Church in Nashville. He says, “we was like ducks in a line and I was the youngest.” According to John, he got a pop music record deal as a teenager, but his grandmother told him he had “to sing for the Lord” instead. John likes singing “Amazing Grace” while he vends (In fact, he sang it for me in our interview.) because “grace, that’s everyday life, you know what I’m saying, God is all in it. I wouldn’t be here making it now and selling the paper without it. And people can know that when I’m out here singing it.” A song, like “Amazing Grace” brings together a central biblical idea about God’s grace with John’s memories of his family and church and his understanding of life with his Contributor work.
Gaining relief from tedium and a body wearied from standing; seeking a lift in mood or increasing paper sells; connecting to and remembering family through shared worship songs; and sharing a message of God’s pervasive and sustaining grace—these are some of the reasons for why vendors sing at their spots and feel closer to God through it. Singing has been studied as a spiritual practice by Don Saliers who locates its power in music’s communal character as well as its embodied nature for music is built into our bodies that function rhythmically and carry memories and strong associations with it.\(^{33}\)

With rhymed stanzas to a repeated tune, hymns can easily “enter the memory, encoding religious experience, commingling belief with affection and depth of emotion” (Saliers 2010, 186) Song can convey and give sounded shape to what we deeply feel or perceive, as it does with these vendors.

Finally and perhaps most interesting among these spiritual activities, a vendor’s street corner can provide encounters with God through sounds that evoke memories of loved ones. Social psychologists have found that people develop a sense of place where their memories associated with particular locations provide a sense of connection, belonging, and history.\(^{34}\) Sociologist of religion Meredith McGuire says that certain sensory experiences like sound can “heighten our spiritual focus and evoke meaningful

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religious experiences.”\textsuperscript{35} Certain sounds can also promote our sense of connection to “our spiritual community” which McGuire defines as those with whom we share collective experiences and memories. Our sense of connection or identification with family or others is based on “a myriad of remembering practices, involving our bodies and emotions, as well as our thoughts.”\textsuperscript{36}

Richard is a prime example of this as he invests his mapped vending spot with personal and religious meaning. One reason Richard loves his vending site is its location: it is on a corner abutting Vanderbilt campus and within distance of the Medical Center. In 2005, Richard’s mother became sick and stayed at VUMC while he was working a rehabilitation program and had shelter at a half way house. In our interview, he warmly described her as pained by his addiction but never wanted to give up on him recovering. He mentioned being raised in a single-parent household by her and says it was his mother who took him to church and taught him about God. He talked about her eventual death at Vanderbilt Hospital and its impact on him:

She was there for two months. I would come be with her. I got so depressed, seeing her so sick, knowing she was not going to make it, knowing how much I had hurt her before. I remember her grabbing my hand and telling me everything was gonna be alright, that she wanted good for me and believed in me. But it wasn’t all alright. I quit my job to spend more time with her, she passed, and that’s when it all hit. I felt like there was no turning back. I didn’t want to be bothered by nobody. When my mother died, I told myself I had to be strong for my sisters but I was the weak one. I turned to drugs and alcohol to numb my pain from losing my mother and that drove me back to the streets.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.
Richard said he thought about killing himself after she died and he fell back into street life and his drug addiction, “but something happened, I guess it was God, and I went to the Salvation Army instead. If my mom had forgiven me, then I was going to try to forgive myself.”

When Richard stayed with mother at the hospital, he often heard the Life Flight helicopters coming in and described them as so “awesome” with their noise and their work of saving lives. Together he and his mother liked to listen out for them and say a prayer for the people inside of them. Today as he sells papers near VUMC, Richard says that when he hears the Life Flight helicopters coming, it makes him feel grateful for his life and reminds him of his mom: “I hear them and I just love life so much now and know my momma is looking down on me.” He adds that he thinks God put him on this street corner to be near his mother’s spirit and this space inspires him to persevere in his vending and his substance abuse program. Richard talked more in depth about this experience at one Living Room meeting as he was crediting God with his fresh start with the street paper work: “I’m out there selling and I got this feeling and I know it’s God. I used to listen to the helicopters when sitting with my mom at Vanderbilt. Now when I hear helicopters come in when I sell my papers, my mom comes to mind. She’s looking down on me smiling and proud of me. It’s keeps me going, man. When she was here I didn’t do so good.”

As he sells the street paper, hearing helicopters brings back memories of his time with his sick mother at the hospital near his vending site, and Richard interprets this as a sign from God that his mother, who has passed away and is in heaven, is with him and
proud of him. The sound evokes a religious experience and promotes, as McGuire says, a sense of connection to God and to his “spiritual community”—in this case, his mother—that he feels in his body (the aural experience and the “feeling” of God), in his emotions (regret, love, confidence, pride), and his beliefs (God has brought this all about and his mother is enjoying a heavenly afterlife.) Further, when Richard hears the helicopters at his work, he says he “feel[s] he just love[s] life so much.” The helicopter sound that carries many associations for Richard of rescue, his mother’s last days, her blessing on him, their prayers for unknown patients. As he sells papers and hears it, it seems to bring Richard confidence in life and reminds him to feel gratitude for many things. He is thankful for second chances and rescues—himself but also those in the helicopter he prayed for while with his mother. He is grateful for gaining his mother’s good words before she died. After he describes himself rather critically as responding to her death with weakness rather than strength and “not doing so good” while she was alive, he imagines that she can now see him and be proud of his work and recovery. She can “look down” and see the way his customers and the police talk to him with respect and see him making a living as a productive citizen.

In the public space of his vendor street corner, these private moments open up a way for him to experience God and his mother’s presence and her knowledge of him doing better. Some social psychological studies have explored listening as a social
practice for how a homeless person forges his life and maintains a place in the city.\textsuperscript{37} Richard’s listening practice—albeit, just for one particular sound—draws a connection between his work place, sound, imagination, and an enhanced sense of self whereby he manages his stigmatization in a positive way. His listening also infuses his street corner with a sense of the holy, a reminder of forgiveness and new life, a God of second chances who brings him these signs at work to keep him strong.

Encountering the sacred through sounds, singing, the wearing of jewelry, being in nature, and financial miracles—these are some ways that the divine is mediated in the everyday work sites of the homeless and formerly homeless \textit{Contributor} vendors and in their bodies standing and walking these street corners. These experiences provide a fitting segue into the next chapter which explores how the homeless, coming to DPC live out their religion in its three homeless social worlds, continue to practice their faith and create sacred space when outside of the church walls.

Chapter 6

Music Row, Dogs, and Tattoos: Sacred Spaces and Things of the Homeless in Nashville

The last three chapters (Chapters 3-5) analyzed the belief-practices of the homeless and formerly homeless participating in the three homeless social worlds housed at DPC, the Living Room, the Wednesday worship, and The Contributor street paper. With Contributor vendors, my analysis of their lived faith began to go outside of the church walls into the city streets where I found that some homeless and formerly homeless vendors felt their work location—usually a street corner or interstate ramp—became a “worship spot” or space where they encountered God in a variety of ways.

This chapter begins by continuing an exploration of where some of the homeless and formerly homeless persons participating in DPC’s homeless social worlds find sacred spaces—spaces where they feel close to God in their particular positive functions—as they live in transit on Nashville’s streets. If homelessness threatens a sense of self and belonging as persons are displaced from prime spaces (Snow and Anderson 1993), their sacred spaces may allow them to experience a sense of belonging and dignity and know that they are more than transgressors. What they call sacred spaces often aligns according to my own theological normative assumptions that they indeed matter to God and can participate in the world in meaningful and creative ways to help them endure their extreme poverty. I try to acknowledge differences when they call a place sacred because it gives an effect or has a valuation for them that I do not find.
I have organized this section on sacred space according to 6 themes (generated by the namings of the homeless) which encompass activities or practices, feelings, or memories conjured up by the photos, as well as scripture and prayers associated with spaces in the photos. These 6 themes broadly are divine absence and protection; country music; creativity; the natural world; companionship with animals; and, caring interactions and care for one’s body. I will then explore tattoos as embodied spiritual practices or sacred things of the homeless. But before I begin these two sections, I want to preface this chapter with a word about my framings and visual ethnographic method. Here, I will briefly speak to how my method and how the homeless persons’ interpretations of what constitutes a sacred thing shaped my chapter’s organization.

While I will continue to invoke Bourdieu at points in this chapter, two place-making theories provide me with necessary framings for this chapter’s work on how the homeless find sacred spaces. One, from social psychology, offers the concept of place-based identities.1 As I noted in the last chapter on the Contributor vendors with Richard’s spiritual experience through sound, social psychological research shows that we form a sense of place where our memories associated with particular locations provide a sense of connection, belonging, and history (Hernandez et al 2007; Hodgetts et al 2010). Social psychological research on place shows how persons instill a place with

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1 This concept is described as the following: place identities emerge “because places, as bounded locales imbued with personal, social, and cultural meanings, provide a significant framework in which identity is constructed, maintained, and transformed.” See Lee Cuba and David Hummon, “A Place to Call Home: Identification with Dwelling, Community, and Region,” The Sociological Quarterly, 34 no.1 (1993): 112. Found in Hodgetts et al, “The Mobile Hermit,” 286.
meaning and “weave themselves into place.” (Hodgetts et al 2010, 286). Persons might invest meaning in a place that is personal, cultural, moral, or aesthetic. Scholars in Christian spirituality suggest that such meanings can take on spiritual significance and that meaning can be drawn from faith; as places mediate the divine and memories associated with a person’s faith, place is formative to our religious identities.²

A second theory helpful for this chapter comes from Jesuit theorist Michel de Certeau who thinks about practices in relation to space and place as he investigates routine practices in a person’s daily existence. In The Practice of Everyday Life, de Certeau looks at walking in a city as a tactic used by persons to give them a sense of being in place.³ Traversing the city streets of Nashville, the homeless have opportunities for experiencing different places—and human and non-human elements inhabiting them—that may become a part of their daily walking routine. Living in transit, the mobile life of a homeless person is “woven together across locales into a kind of

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² Two other scholars in Christian spirituality who have written on sacred space are Belden Lane and Philip Sheldrake. See, Sheldrake, Spaces for the Sacred: Place, Memory, and Identity (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001) and Lane, Landscapes of the Sacred: Geography and Narrative in American Spirituality (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001) and Lane, The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

³ Michel de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 91-110. de Certeau differentiates between tactics and strategies in his theory on practices and place-making. Strategies are used by producers, defined as hegemonic institutions of power that make the city’s overarching map and plan for a unified place. Tactics are used by individual consumers as they act on and live in their city place and make it into space—essentially he defines space as a practiced place. Repetitive tactical practices such as walking a city—or in some cases with the homeless, sleeping, resting, or interacting with persons and non-human creatures—can create and re-create space when they work with the structures of place already provided.
‘walking exile’” (de Certeau 1984, 107; Hodgetts et al. 2010, 287). Walking, then, is a practice whereby the homeless can “invent spaces” by “insert[ing] themselves into the accepted framework, the imposed order” of the city (de Certeau 1984, 106-7).

Besides place-making theories, this chapter has relied on visual ethnography with the homeless using disposable cameras to photograph their sacred spaces.4 Research suggests the photo-elicitation process brings benefits. This is not to say the activity was without limitations: one drawback was for those wanting to photograph aspects of their Penuel Ridge retreats with the Living Room (the labyrinth, for instance), but because of their time or transportation constraints, these did not happen. However, taking pictures carries the potential for empowering subjects to express significant personal values and understandings about social conditions and place (Beilin 2005). It also is considered helpful for “bridging traditional divides in the production of knowledge” such as between theory and practice (Luttrell and Chalfen 2010, 197). This participatory-visual method of giving the homeless cameras affords them “full presence in knowledge,” and I hoped that taking pictures of sacred spaces might provide a way to “redirect the gaze” for the homeless to articulate what they know and point out the limits of what the non-homeless can see (Luttrell 2010, 224- 225). Three subjects shared that they enjoyed taking pictures because it gave them a chance to be “creative,” to “show the Nashville [they]

knew,” or discover something about themselves and God in their daily life that they then were excited for others to know. They also told me that they enjoyed doing this because it relieved some boredom and gave them a task that expected they could be thoughtful.

Since photos can elicit emotional or visceral responses and call on us to interpret, remember, and imagine, I had hoped using pictures would be fruitful for interviews. In fact, I discovered that I had to re-work my original tidy categories separating sacred reading and prayer from sacred spaces and sacred things in this chapter. While some homeless persons did acknowledge reading the bible as helpful, I found that many homeless might talk more about their prayers or biblical knowledge while they talked about a hard time or a tattoo or looked at their photos. I wondered if my direct questions about reading the bible may have unfortunately silenced some who have little book literacy. (As one defiantly told me, he did not need to read the bible since he had God’s Spirit in him.) In talking about these pictures as well as the sacred things of their tattoos, they readily shared some biblical knowledge that at times may have come through their own reading but perhaps more often came through listening to sermons, the teachings of family elders, or singing in church. Some of their discourse about their sacred spaces and tattoos was filled with biblical cadences, and I hope to capture some of that here.

While I generated the activity of photographing sacred spaces, I had no control over what pictures they would take nor over what themes would appear: their namings of what was a sacred space generated the six themes. Similarly, I had no control over how the homeless would hear “sacred things,” “things that keep your faith strong,” or “things where you feel close to God or Jesus.” Varied responses showed how few their
possessions were. A few replied, “just my memories in my head.” Others said, “my sanity,” and while they were half-teasing, there was also a seriousness that underscored just how much homelessness could engulf someone. A few insisted they did not hold things sacred because that could be idolatry but they did talk about people they held sacred, often a grandparent. One, whose sacred thing was in storage, named his storage unit as a kind of sacred space—Aaron, for instance, was intentional about getting away from the Mission during the day to be at his storage unit playing the guitar, which in expressing his musical gift and being in safety and solitude, made him feel close to God.

Interestingly, one interpreted his street name as a sacred thing. Choosing a street name can be a significant act of agency for homeless youth whereby they can create a street identity different from the one they wish to discard. Strider, a young single white man in his twenties who has been homeless off and on since he grew out of the foster care system, told me, “All I got right now is my name” and explained to me that he chose to go by Strider after being inspired by the Lord of the Rings stories where Strider is “the good guy” who “can take care of himself and fight for good.” In this Tolkien series, Strider is a heroic warrior who helps protect Frodo and his hobbit friends as they journey and fight to get rid of the ring of Sauron, and eventually he becomes king. As Strider described today’s world to me in apocalyptic terms, he explained that this story is “really about God and the fight between light and darkness.” It seems that this story made a powerful impact on Strider who identified with one of its heroes. His new street name

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could signal to others familiar with the story something about his desired persona—his toughness and his ability to protect himself. Perhaps, too, Strider experienced some sense of security and connection to God and the “forces of light” in taking on his name.

Many said they had no sacred things. Phyllis looked at me like I was crazy for asking and replied: “You can’t keep things when you’re homeless. At my age, I’m supposed to have a house, furniture, care, but I done it backwards.” Often possessions held dear were stolen at a shelter, their camp, or the bus station as they came in town. Lisa compared her rape on the streets to having her pictures of her grandmother stolen: “It was a violation of my space and who I am. I can’t ever get them back.” Chris recalled how he managed to hold onto important family photos and an old family bible only to return to his camp site one day to find the authorities throwing away all of his belongings. When he tried to recover them from their dumpster, he was threatened with arrest. This has happened three or four times now to him and has changed Chris’ attitude toward holding anything sacred. Chris now embraces living simply, if for no other reason than because he cannot afford to allow himself to be overwhelmed again by the grief of loss: “We come into world without a thing and leave it without a thing. I’ve lost everything so many times. I would go nuts if I stop and let myself really think about it. It doesn’t matter to me anymore. There’s nothing I’m going to hold onto and worry about.”

If the homeless tended to pass over my questions about reading the bible, several, even those who said they had no sacred things, might come back at another point in their interviews to say that their bible itself was something they held sacred. Often persons named it as holy, not because they had read the stories or because it contained God’s
Word, but because they felt the material object of the book itself was a source of divine comfort when they were in dangerous places. I heard from some like Jason that they carry their bible wherever they go. Kenny Bill said he feels “soothed” having it near and is “kinda disturbed” when it’s not in his backpack. Holding it helps him go to sleep at night at the Mission. Larry called the bible his “sword and defense” at the Mission. Aaron explained that while he does like to read his bible, just having it where people could see it at the Mission made him feel safer “around so many unhealthy people…the devil cannot stand the presence of God. It keeps all evil from you.”

Finally, I focused this chapter’s second half about sacred things on the tattoos of the homeless based on how they responded in interviews. Certainly, things were mentioned—pictures of a grandmother, a homemade quilt, a cross, a keychain from a church—but by far, the homeless who had tattoos were more willing to talk about them. I wondered if these keepsakes were more painful to talk about (which seems perplexing to me since their bereavement tattoos involved deep loss). Perhaps subjects would share more about the meanings their tattoos held because they were right there on their skin for us to see. One woman pointed to hers when I asked about her sacred things and told me all she had left right now was her body. It seemed like their tattoos as embodied practices of faith, even more than any thing they held onto, highlighted the transience of their lives.

_Sacred Spaces Revealing God’s Absence and God’s Protective Presence_

Interestingly, Bud took pictures where he felt God was not present: the Mission courtyard, the Mission food line, and the food itself. For Bud, experiencing the sacred includes experiencing an absence of God. He explained about the Mission,
when you are there, you are at the bottom of your ropes. Nowhere to turn. Who wants to live with a bunch of these guys? My bags have gotten stolen there. Lotta times, I walk around asking God here, ‘Where are you?’ In order to get a bed, you got to go to chapel. That’s messed up. Would God really require that? Lotta times I just block it all out. They call for the Holy Ghost but it’s not a spiritual moment.

Looking at his picture of the Mission food line, Bud recounts a time when someone was stabbed in the food line and people continued as if nothing had happened. He is particularly bothered by the degradation of the experience of depending on others for food and waiting for it: “Is this what I got to go through if I eat for free? I mean, standing in this line it’s so, well, I sure don’t feel close to God in the food line. I hate being in food lines. I try not to get free food and when I do I say, ‘Well, damn, here I go again.’ God doesn’t want this for me.” Bud also took a close-up picture of his food tray because he distrusts the quality of the food: “I pray over these meals, for sure, that I won’t get sick. I mean, I pray for God to let it nourish me, but you never know. God ain’t giving that food. Just as worse to eat out of a trash can.” (see figures 6.1-6.3)

Figure 6.1. Mission Courtyard  Figure 6.2. Mission food line

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Not only did naming God’s absence show some thoughtfulness and improvisation on Bud’s part with this photo activity, but it is true to the Christian tradition and human experience. While I cannot evaluate Bud’s identification of sacred space in the Mission and its food line as sacred according to my own theological norms of feeling Beloved and having agency, Bud’s feeling an absence of God and calling out to God in theodicy has been one way in the Christian tradition to experience the sacred. A deprivation or negation of God is attested by biblical sources from the suffering cries of Job to Jesus and voices in the Christian apophatic tradition from Gregory of Nyssa’s *Life of Moses* to John the Cross’s *Dark Night of the Soul*.

Bud also took pictures where he felt divine protection as he walked through an alley near his mother’s home “in the projects” and as he slept outside (see figures 6.4-5).
An alley becomes a place for prayer with Psalm 23 when he feels fearful of his surroundings, “when I’m by myself and walking the streets by myself, He keeps me safer. If someone comes out, I can feel negative spirits a lot when I pass someone by. I pray in these moments for him to keep me safe through the, what is it? Oh, I say it, it’s in the bible, the valley of the shadow of death, stay with me.” In Figure 5, Bud is reenacting his safe sleeping outside at the doorstep of DPC that he understood as a gift from Jesus: “I slept here when I had nowhere to go. I felt comfortable here. Jesus gave me this place to sleep without nobody bothering me—no police arresting me, no one trying to take my spot or hurt me. Jesus told me I’d be safe here. All I can do is be thankful for the little voices that I think come from him.”

Like Bud, Toni, a Living Room participant, took a picture of space made sacred through God’s protection, but of a different sort than safe provision in sleeping outside or being in a dangerous alley. A 32-year-old white woman and divorced with two children, Toni has been homeless this past year after leaving Ohio. She says she has struggled with a bi-polar disorder and the trauma of child abuse. Toni likes to walk down to
ARITI’s Campus for Human Development and “hang out” where there is a large angel statue. I have heard others in Living Room meetings talk about this statute as something that gives them a sense of peace, which Toni also expresses, but Toni attributes her calm in the presence of this statute as God’s protection from her own anger. She admits having difficulty staying at the Mission with some women, particularly when she sees mothers yelling at their children. The angel reminds her to continually pray, “Lord contain me. Lord, contain me.” I really try to say it under my breath every five minutes. I swear I could go off at any time. Being with her [the angel] reminds me to keep saying it and that God is defending me from my anger. Prayer is the most powerful weapon you got. It’s like you got the holy Ghost on the phone.” Although Toni says she never prays “in a traditional way,” Toni’s repetitive prayer about her anger echoes early Christian Desert Fathers and Mothers who were concerned about overcoming the passions, like anger.7

Toni also identifies with the angel as God’s defender of the innocent. As she looks at the angel, she remembers her own physical and sexual abuse as a child and feels called to look out for others. “I’m a defender like this angel for those who can’t defend themselves,” says Toni, as she talks about watching out for children at the Mission and

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6 This picture did not turn out well enough to show here.
7 The Desert Fathers and Mothers thought love could only grow within us when we learned to see, root out, and discipline the passions, habitual actions and states of mind, including anger. One way to do this was through a prayer repeated and ruminated on, such as we see with John Cassian’s continual praying of “Lord, make haste to help me” in Conference 10. See John Cassian, Conferences (Classics of Western Spirituality) ed. Colhm Luibheid, (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1985), 125-140. Also, see Roberta Bondi, To Love as God Loves: Conversations with the Early Church (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 57-77.
her desire to work with young girls abroad who are victims of sex trade. “God put me through that hard time so that I can now see it when it’s happening to others and intercede on their behalf.” Being near the angel statue, Toni feels reminded to pray for God to contain her anger and defend her from it. As she remembers her own abuse, she sees the angel calling her to defend other innocents. While I refuse to see that God “put” her through child abuse, her interpretation shows her trying to make sense of a hard time she that she can see herself as mattering and working for God’s good.

Sacred Space of Feeling at Home: Country Music Row

Gary’s picture of Music Row conveyed sacred space because it showed a place where he “felt at home.” Much of what Gary shared about his life resonates with what Ruby Payne and Tex Sample have said about the hidden rules of those in the poor working class with “hard living” habits, particularly with men’s pride in fighting and both fighting and drinking perceived as entertainment. A 52-year-old white man, Gary has been homeless off and on for over 15 years while finding some work in construction, janitorial maintenance, and The Contributor. Gary’s full wiry gray beard, imposing stature, and his fighting nickname of “Moose” which he earned wrestling persons and bears, all lend to him a bit of a wild image which is fitting since he is from Oakridge, settled in the East Tennessee hills of southern Appalachia. He is proud of his mother who served her part during the Second World War with factory work separating uranium. He grew up in a Baptist church where the pastor was not helpful since he was just another one of his father’s drinking buddies. His mother and grandmother took him to church while his father, a mailman, slept off a weekend of drinking.
Playing music on his guitar and “getting saved” as a young person were the times he felt closest to God although feeling close to God was difficult because he “didn’t have a normal childhood.” He describes it as one “with a lot of carrying on” between his parents where he had to intervene: “My mom would stop for a case of beer and my dad would stop and get a case of beer for the weekend, and boy the race was on! If the Friday night fights did not happen you could guarantee that on Saturday, the shit would hit the fans. Fist brawls, whipping each other, the belts, I’d get between them and when I got big enough to whip my man’s ass, I did it.” Gary has been married three times and is estranged from his two children. He elaborated that “it wasn’t worth going to jail to see them” because of unpaid child support. Although Gary cites losing his work for his homelessness, it seems from his interview (and his story recorded on NPR’s Story Corp that he gave me permission to use) that medical bills, back payments on taxes and child support, and drinking significantly factor into it, too. Gary mentioned getting “a little criminal record’ from his public drinking arrests and DUI’s that have hindered his job search: “I can’t ever get rid of the record, even if I do stop drinking. It never goes away. Society won’t ever let a man up.”

Because of his passion for country music, Music Row gives him a sense of home in Nashville, a city he has “a love affair with” and “adopted”: “I could be homeless the rest of my life, with no place to go, and all you have to do is drop me on Music Row and I feel at home.” (see figure 6.6) Calling Nashville a “mecca” for country music, Gary, perhaps unintentionally, invokes an image of himself as a kind of pilgrim coming to Nashville to chase a dream of writing country music after he lost his job with the
Tennessee Valley Authority due to federal budget cuts. Gary brags some about singers with whom he has shared a beer including the likes of Willie Nelson in the Lower Broadway joints. He likens himself to other songwriters who have shared his struggles with homelessness and drinking as he names a few (including himself) who slept in doorways and on porches in the Music Row area and have now turned their homeless experiences into songs.8

![Gary's Music Row](image)

Figure 6.6. Gary’s Music Row

Gary explains that he feels at home on Music Row in part because he “found people there and in the music just like me.” He adds, “I can listen to these songs and say, ‘there I am.’ Those songs are about hard living and if you haven’t lived it like I have, well, Nashville will spot a fake.” Gary has one song under contract at BMI for which he

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and another Contributor vendor wrote the chorus, “Another Shot at Dying.”9 After singing the chorus, Gary explains the song’s inspiration: “It’s a song about quitting drinking and needing a second chance at living. I was drinking beer one Sunday morning with my friend who asked me for one. I said, ‘Naw, you need a better shot at dying than this cause it ain’t working quick enough.’” He sighed, “Oh, it’s no good. I want to quit drinking, I do, but I just can’t do it yet. Dying is easy. Living is the hard part. Do-si-do.”

According to Gary, writing country music must come from a place of hard times, of which he shares many: growing up in a home where his father drank and got violent in “Friday night Fights”; not being able to afford his children Christmas presents; failing at three marriages; getting arrested for public drinking or fighting; getting pneumonia from sleeping in his truck in the cold—the list could go on. “You can’t write country music unless you’ve lived it,” Gary says, “You don’t have any real music until you get down and out. They say country music is the white man’s blues.” Dubbed “white man’s blues” or “white soul” music, country music has been explored for its social, political and religious foundations among poor white working class Americans, and particularly Southern low church Christians.10 Country music is distinctly American and distinctly

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9 The chorus goes like this: A better shot at dying is what I’m living for/ When all these earthly pleasures just don’t matter any more/I’ll tell all my friends the gospel truth/There’s no more denying/I’m giving up the high life now/For another shot at dying.
10 This is not to say that today, all Evangelicals and poor working class white people love country music or that all country music fans are Evangelicals and poor white working class. Three important resources exploring the religious, social, and political dimensions of country music include the following: Tex Sample, White Soul: Country Music, the Church, and Working Americans (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996); David Fillingim, Redneck Theology (Macon: Mercer Press, 2003); Gene Veith and Thomas Wilmeth, Honky Tonk Gospel: The Story of Sin and Salvation in Country Music (Grand Rapids:
rooted in common folk. It has connections to and roots in Appalachian folk ballads and bluegrass songs, the “blue yodels” of Jimmy Rodgers, African American jazz and blues, the earthy bellows of sacred harp, revivalist gospel hymns, and the rockabilly style of Elvis who synthesizes some of these types of music.

Gary’s “Another Shot at Dying” chorus represents a staple country music type, the drinking song, which can take a celebratory tone as alcohol provides an escape from one’s drudgery job or a romance gone awry, or it can take a more desperate tone where someone hits rock bottom and admits needing to change to continue living—what Gary’s song calls, “the gospel truth” (Veith and Wilmeth 2001, 122-125). Gary’s song takes the latter tone and is comparable to other country music artists whose music reflects their hope for conversion after struggling with alcoholism. I see Gary’s song as a kind of “secularized testimony” that is often found in country music and can be traced back to old revival testimonies of confession of sin for repentance (Veith and Wilmeth 2001, 21). Country music as testimony often tell little stories of loss, remorse, or sin and they may wind their way to wisdom gained from painful personal experience or a conversion of sorts. Singers like Johnny Cash and Hank Williams, Jr, who acknowledged their

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11 For example, in Cash’s song of conversion, “Unchained,” he gets on his knees and confesses his weakness and asks God to “take this weight from me/Let my spirit be unchained.” See Veith and Wilmeth, *Honky Tonk Gospel*, 75. In his 2008 testimony, Cash talked about his conversion from “the Man in Black” to “The Man in White” akin to the apostle Paul.
traditional Christian morality, had such songs of “secularized testimony” expressing their struggles with drinking as a moral struggle of sin and guilt. As such, I wonder if Gary may gain a sense of belonging in the place of Music Row as it relates to country music singers who are like him in the hard times his own song alludes to. More than once in our interview, he used traditional conversion language in talking about the need to “surrender to God’s will” in relation to drinking and other aspects of life. He seems to see his struggle with drinking as a religious experience of sin calling for conversion, one that his song’s speaker is ready for but that he says he is not.

Sample, invoking Bourdieu, contends that country music is a practice (such as enjoying, performing, writing, etc…) rooted in the working class tradition (33). As Sample has pointed out and I referenced in Chapter 3 about the Living Room as a place of oral tradition, people in poverty tend to engage the world in oral terms. Country music reflects its roots in an oral tradition with its focus on stories, the relationships among characters, and life events as well as its concrete language (Sample 1996, 32). In fact, this concreteness is what lends it credibility for someone like Gary who calls it “real music.” Consider Gary’s title and chorus line, “Another Shot at Dying”—it has a proverbial quality to it that works with an “implicit knowing” of what it means to persevere because it comes out of Gary’s life formed by a poor working class sensibility of holding on and holding out for a better life (Sample 1996, 86).

Sample says that closely linked to the practice of country music is another working class practice, taste. Again drawing on Bourdieu, he calls the poor working class taste a “dominated aesthetic” or “a taste of necessity” that is always defined in
reference to the dominant elite. Sample describes working class taste as one imposed by a habitus of a “life lived under constraint” (36). This can be defiantly embraced. For example, Gary proudly referred to his music taste and to himself a few times as “redneck,” a stereotype of poor uneducated rural whites and an epithet that signals someone comfortable being ‘disreputable.’ In fact, Gary was the sole person I interviewed who had something positive to say about the Mission and it was the emotive worship service with its “rocking country music where [he] feel[s] the Spirit.” He couched his compliment of the Mission’s service with, “But what can I say, I’m a redneck through and through.”

Country music, as a practice in the working class tradition, serves intrinsic goods with an end not in the music itself but in the music’s “living expression” of the poor working class life (Sample 1996, 78). Two of its intrinsic goods that Sample identifies are relevant to Gary’s perception of sacred space in the intertwining of the Music Row, the larger Music City, and country music songs and singers. One intrinsic good of the working class practice of country music is that it intensifies feelings shaped by taste (72).

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13 Jim Goad defines a redneck as someone “both conscious of and comfortable with his designated role as cultural jerk.” John Hartigan and Goad both give interesting discussions on how “redneck” is a derogatory label meant to shame a person’s poverty and taste tied to it. Rednecks tend to embrace it, even with its host of stigmatizations, and look down and differentiate themselves from “white trash.” Both Goad and Hartigan attend to the racial elements in name calling and say ‘redneck’ is a racial epithet used to affirm a normative whiteness, one free from the shame of poverty. Jim Goad, *Redneck Manifesto: How Hillbillies, Hicks, and White Trash became America’s Scapegoats* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 83-4. Also, see John Hartigan, “Who are these White People?” in *White Out: The Continuing Significance of Racism* ed. Ashley Doane and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (New York: Routledge Press, 2003), 95-112.
Sample argues working class taste is not just a “dominated aesthetic” but also a 
“dominated affect,” so that the feelings of living a “life under constraint” can be 
discounted or ignored (75). Thus, country music can give voice to marginalized feelings 
of poor working class persons. Gary did not mention these directly, but seeing his 
“redneck” taste performed and loved by others in country music sounds and lyrics could 
be an important good that makes him “feel the Spirit” and emplaces him even as he is a 
“walking exile” (de Certeau 1986) in homelessness. Further, his hard experiences of 
unemployment, failure with three marriages, struggles with and incarceration for 
drinking, or separation from his children can entail difficult feelings that get voiced in 
country music lyrics where he can see he has company in them.

A second of country music’s intrinsic goods is making the ordinary everyday life 
of the poor working class important (Sample 1996, 70). Much of what gives Gary a 
sense that he matters and belongs to Music Row (and Nashville) and so calls it sacred, is 
that the music conveys the real hard living stories of his own life. He turns to the practice 
of writing country music to tell his own story of wanting “another shot at dying” that he 
interprets as a faith issue of sin and conversion, or “surrendering to God’s will.” This 
good can be heard in Johnny Cash’s reasons given for loving country music. I cannot 
help but imagine Gary would nod in agreement at how Cash says the sins and graced 
comforts of his everyday life, are fused for him with the spiritual: “I love songs about 
horses, railroads, land, judgment day, family, hard times, whiskey, courtship, marriage, 
adultery, separation, murder, war, prison, rambling, damnation, home, salvation, death, 
pride, humor, piety, rebellion, patriotism, larceny, determination, tragedy, rowdiness,
heartbreak, and love. And Mother. And God.” 14 Gary identifies Music Row as sacred space because it gave him a place to sleep, but even more so, it continues giving him a place to belong among others who have lived “life under constraint” (so, Sample) and who share his love for enjoying and writing country music, a spiritual practice where he feels close to God through his senses and “redneck” taste.

Sacred Space found in Creativity

Toni’s pictures showed her experiences of God with human creativity. Having attended culinary school and trained in tattoo inking, Toni sees herself as an artist. Figure 6.7 shows a graffiti mural on her regular walking circuit near RITI. The mural’s words of “Thoughts Manifested,” speaks of the sacred to Toni. Toni explains that the “artistic expression” in her thoughts originate in God, so her own creative impulses and work makes her feel close to God: “When I sculpt or draw or paint or cook, I feel immediately connected to God. My art is a spiritual thing.” 15 For Toni, the divine is an artist and our image of and likeness to God is found in our ability to create: “I associate Him with a master artist. I think the human being is an expression of God’s art itself. We are reflections of that art. God is a potter and a painter in the bible. That’s what separates

14 Cash’s Liner notes to “Unchained” found in Veith and Wilmeth, Honky Tonk Gospel, 16.

15 Toni’s words resonate with artists Robert Wuthnow interviewed in his study on artists who view their creative work as a part of their spirituality. He describes the unifying features of their different understandings of spirituality: a belief in a mysterious spirit that cannot be fully known but can be experienced in unexpected epiphanies, often stimulated by art or use of art in meditation. See, Wuthnow, Creative Spirituality: The Way of the Artist (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 27-39.
us from animals—our ability to artistically express ourselves and to find meaning within someone else’s expression like I do with this mural.”

Figure 6.7. Creativity in Street Graffiti

Toni grew so excited by this that she had plans to paint a globe of the world on a pregnant woman’s belly at the Mission as a way of “celebrating all life, life is just another form of art. I see it in [the pregnant women] at the Mission. It’s so cool the way our bodies stretch and our guts mush together to bring another life into the world.”

Besides the mural, Toni photographed children making chalk drawings on the street in front of the Women’s Mission (see figure 6.8).

Figure 6.8. Creativity in Children’s Play
Again, Toni said this was a sacred space because the children were showing some creativity: “They are in their own little world. That is very much a part of being an artist, knowing when you need to separate from others and take time to create beauty.” She likes to fill her day scribbling with them because of how her body feels like it “can let go and relax. I mean, it takes my impatience out of me and replaces it with patience and calm. I can get into it and my body just loses a sense of where I am. I can find some of my lost innocence.” Thus, the space is sacred to her not just for the creativity being expressed but because of how her body feels when she is drawing and with these children whose innocence remind her of the divine that she says “is all light and love and innocence.” Toni described how in that space with the children, she nostalgically recollected how she loved this activity during her own childhood summers, “a time that was so happy and simple,” before she was sexually and physically abused as a young person and then in her marriage.16 Walking the city, she encounters God the artist in wall graffiti. Outside of the Mission on sidewalks, space is made sacred when she can let her body relax, draw with children and recapture feelings of lost innocence by recalling childhood memories of similar summer activities.

Sacred Space found in the Natural World: Sky, Water, High Places, and Trees

16 Toni’s nostalgia may be doing some important work for her. More recent research on nostalgia has discovered bittersweet longing for an idealized past time has positive benefits such as enabling self-continuity and a feeling of belonging and generating positive self regard. See, Constantine Sedikides et al, “Nostalgia: Content, Triggers, and Functions,” Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 91, no. 5 (Nov. 2006): 975-993.
The human’s experience of the natural world can be a valuable way to the Spirit. Some of the homeless pictures showed how their being resting in the shade of a tree or looking at the water or sky are activities that they feel bring them in touch with the transcendent be it in prayer or solitude. Looking at the sky was named as a way to encounter the divine by Toni, Bud, and Robin, but how each gave meaning to their sky watching was very different. Toni’s photo is of an early morning sky as she starts walking from the Mission to hang out at the outdoor Bicentennial Mall (see figure 6.9).

Figure 6.9. “The world and day are fresh and I am with it.”

Toni likes the sky best in the early morning and says she will pray with a poem or a bible verse:

I like how the sun just starts to come through on the trees and reminds me of my favorite poem by Frost that was in the book, The Outsiders, ‘Nothing Gold Can Stay.’ You know, it’s the first light God created, the dawn of a new day, no mistakes yet have been made and I cherish that bit of time because it’s very fleeting but it makes me feel all innocent and good and hopeful for the day. The world and the day are fresh and I am with it.

Toni also likes to pray when she looks at the sky with Psalm 30 to which she “clings,”

“Weeping shall endure for the night, but joy cometh in the morning.” Toni explains that her “weeping” is her time right now of being homeless and of recalling her abuse as a
child and in her marriage. When she prays that verse and looks at a “clean sky” it makes her realize that “it will all be okay” and God has a purpose in her “weeping”: “See, this is all spiritual boot camp. God has something special planned for me that is not what everyday people have planned. That’s why I was given those experiences. Being abused and then homeless, I’ve had to come to rely on him in ways people can’t so that I can go out and do his work.” Unlike Toni, Bud’s picture of the sky has edges of the Nashville skyline, building construction, and a parking lot (see figure 6.10).

Figure 6.10. Bud’s sky: “How come you can’t?”

Bud tells me that “the sky shows us where our souls gonna dwell at when we’re home with the Lord,” and then explains that he can look up to the sky and pray to God for a job in one of the buildings he sees, housing in one of the hotels, or a car like the ones in this lot. Hesitantly, perhaps from the reality of his felony record he has bewailed for impeding employment opportunities, Bud says, “It’s just a dream.” He quickly adds, “but God lets me see the dream to remind myself of what I can do. When I talk to God, God is putting it in my head, ‘You can be over there working. How come you can’t?’”
Finally, Robin’s view of the sky comes from her vending spot in front of Walmart near the interstate at 100 Oaks Mall. Robin is a 48-year-old white woman who has been divorced but now lives alone except on weekends when a boyfriend comes to stay with her. When work is slow, Robin looks to the sky and says to herself, “See, I am coming in the clouds.” She is looking for Jesus in the coming Rapture that she tells me is in Revelation (see figure 6.11).

![Image](image.jpg)

Figure 6.11. “See, I am coming in the clouds”

Robin struggles with being bipolar and staying clean from drugs and alcohol, which she began abusing during her work as an exotic dancer. Robin also has been incarcerated for what sounds like a drunk driving accident and drug possession. She is worried about her current relationship: her boyfriend has a history of abusing her, “although he is nicer now” that he stays with Robin who provides him with beer and cigarettes on the weekends and in return, he gives her transportation and helps a bit with her rent. She would like “to call it quits” but says, “he got me over a barrel.” She got housing far from bus lines and worries she will become homeless again if she breaks up with him.
Looking at the photo, she cries, “I want Jesus to hurry up and come. I’m sick of all of this here on earth.”

Looking at the sky as they walk or sell papers, these three homeless persons invest it with different meanings. Toni and Bud both pray as they look at it, but Toni, using a poem or a psalm, prays to a God of goodness and light. She takes hope for joy in a fresh day and tries to make meaning of her own hard times as being given by God to shape her into something special. Bud sees city buildings and petitions to God in the sky, God’s dwelling place, for help getting work and transportation, a dream he thinks God gives him to help him persist in hoping for something better. Robin, like Bud, notes the sky is God’s heavenly home and in moments of despair, she calls out to the Jesus of Revelation for his second coming.

I concede that I have not experienced the trauma and extreme poverty that Toni and Robin have and certainly they have the right to their own theological views, but I would not call either of their belief-practices redemptive. With Toni, in her own way, I suppose she finds God calling her Beloved by interpreting her hard time as forming her for a “special” calling, but I refuse to see God giving her abuse or homelessness to intentionally shape her. Nor would I call Robin’s prayer redemptive. On one hand, the rapture might give her something to hold onto in times when she feels so overwhelmed that she cannot see any way for her to feel like she matters and has a place. On the other hand, her particular looking to the sky seems to displace her even further. Her understanding of the sky as sacred space strikes me as otherworldly “pie-in-the-sky”
belief that does not ground her own sense of agency and action where she needs support to get out of a toxic relationship that may threaten her own sobriety and personal safety.

Water, high spots, and trees also provided sacred spaces for the homeless. Robin photographed creek water that she sees while she sells *The Contributor* (see figure 6.12).

![Figure 6.12. “Streams in the desert”](image)

When she looks at it, she sees the water God promises to send in Second Isaiah 43. “See, I am doing a new thing. I am creating streams in the desert,” quotes Robin. The parallels between Robin’s own desert experience in homelessness and the Babylonian exiles are obvious as she looks to Isaiah’s Little Book of Comfort and retelling of the Exodus narrative. When I asked her what her “streams” were in her life—who or what concretely provided her with comfort—she did not know: “I’m not sure where I see it. I know when I see the creek water it is a sign that God’s promise to create a new thing in me is real, but I just don’t know. Nowhere. Maybe the people I sell to. I don’t have streams yet. I don’t see my getting my life back yet. And that’s the new thing I keep waiting for.”
Robin’s biblically shaped imagination informs her understanding of where “signs” from God appear. Ordinary creek water becomes a sign of God’s new thing, and gives her some fragile hope of “getting her life back” from an exile in homelessness.

In figures 6.13-14, Bud is on his way to the hill behind the State Capitol, looking out onto the Bicentennial Mall. He sits on the high spot once occupied by the slums of Hell’s Half Acre before federal funds created some green space to remove the blighted area.

![Figure 6.13. Bud’s “high spot”](image)

At the hill’s bottom, is a sign with a quotation by Andrew Jackson calling for protecting the rights of the poor. He calls it “a word from God to give me a pick-me-up.”
Part of why Bud feels like this “high spot” on the hill is sacred is because it gives him a sense of normalcy and an activity he thinks non-homeless do outside and one “that God would want me to do.” Bud calls this “picnicking” even though he has no food and blanket and laughs: “I just like to think that’s what I’m doing because that’s what people do, you know, they get together and have a good time outside with food and each other. So I call it that.” Even though Bud enjoys imagining himself doing an activity that involves others, he also enjoys the “seclusion” and the “alone time” where he can “meditate” and “just be quiet with God.” He “feels relaxed and not on edge.”

Finally in the sacred spaces of the natural world, a large old tree becomes a place of solitude and shelter for Gary. It is tucked away behind 21st Ave. on the land of St Bernard’s old convent. Gary can fall back into its gnarled strong branches low to the ground, and take a nap. He says, “It’s just peace and serenity. I need that right now cause I feel like I’m losing it. I’m stressed out, ready to snap, not getting my disability
checks. It’s my favorite peaceful spot in the whole city. Not many places I can come and relax and escape the noise of the city and people staring. A shady spot.” (see figure 6.15)

Figure 6.15. Gary’s Tree

After the biblical language I heard with these pictures, I was almost surprised not to hear Gary quote scripture. His feeling close to God in the shelter of a tree has biblical resonances from Abraham and the wandering Israelites encamping under trees to the lover in the Song of Solomon being imaged as a shady apple tree to the tree of life offering wisdom in Proverbs. What Gary does say shows that he feels more fully human in this spot because his body gets to relax in solitude and escape the sense that he is stared at and exposed. The tree offers him a momentary space to “salvage the self” (Snow and Anderson 1993) and not “lose it.”

Both Bud and Gary look to the natural world, be it a high hill or a tree, to find some solitude. In their homelessness and the host of stigmatizations it can carry, they may both experience loneliness and estrangement from their families or society, but in
these spaces, neither talks about feeling lonely or what Tillich called the “pain of being alone” (Although, I suppose it is possible Bud feels some loneliness since he is pretending to ‘picnic.’) and instead seem to be experiencing “the glory of being alone.”

Solitude has a rich tradition in Christianity and in American spirituality. Religious scholar John Barbour has described the connections between solitude and spirituality, a few which seem to be happening here with both men. Both Bud and Gary intentionally seek out these quiet spaces to “transcend their roles and routines” of homelessness that can leave them feeling “trapped, bored, or overwhelmed.” They find solitude as a way to momentarily cope with a little of the accumulated stress of homelessness. Barbour also says returning to solitude can allow someone to regain a “healthy distance” from others so that they can “recover the deep springs of personal identity” including “bodily

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18 In the bible, important figures from Jacob and Moses to Elijah and Jesus all retreat at points where they experience God through a reassurance of God’s presence, a struggle and blessing, or a call or renewal of call. Early Desert Fathers such as St Anthony were part of a desert or wilderness solitary tradition. John Barbour explores Christian attitudes toward and the social significance of solitude. He analyzes the concept and practice of solitude for Augustine (who valued it for bringing knowledge of self and God) to Thomas Merton (who valued it for forming him not only to contemplate God and become more fully human in the practice, but in being detached from society, to give a valuable outsider perspective on social problems). Barbour, *The Value of Solitude: The Ethics and Spirituality of Aloneness in Autobiography* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004). Also, in Leigh Schmidt’s tracing of the genealogy of American spirituality, he examines the shift from a Protestant ambivalence toward solitude (seen as a vice in tragic, melancholy figures) to a full acceptance of it as a way to meet the sacred. He pinpoints this shift happening in the 19th century with Transcendentalists Thoreau and Alger as well as Cady Stanton. Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 63-100.
awareness” that does not always get felt in one’s daily social roles. Bud and Gary both are aware of their bodies feeling calm instead of their usual “on edge-ness” that comes with worries over missing disability checks and unemployment as well as the habitual homeless posture of “watching your back” for threats to their safety. Feeling this peace in their bodies in solitude provided by God may give them a way of knowing the divine and that they belong to the divine.

**Sacred Space in Companionship of Non-human Creatures**

Some photographs show that for a few homeless companions animals make God real for them. Research has shown the benefits that homeless pet owners—men, women, and teenagers—gain from having a companion animal. Pets can reduce feelings of loneliness for the homeless (Rew 2000), help the homeless manage stigmatized identities and facilitate positive social interaction (Irvine 2012), and give them a sense of responsibility, comfort, and acceptance (Labreque and Walsh 2011). Pets are considered “vehicles of redemption” by some homeless who credit them with changing their lives for

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20 Ibid  
the better and giving them a reason to seek and maintain housing or to stay sober (Irving 2013, 3). The advantages of a companion animal also have been identified by animal behaviorists and veterinarians with the general population of non-homeless persons as well as other marginalized populations: lowering blood pressure in stressful situations, providing a sense of emotional stability for foster children, helping to establish socially appropriate behavior in prisoners and helping psychiatric patients work through anxiety and despair are just a few of the identified benefits. Researchers have done work to come to a more positive understanding of the animal-human bond as well as the animal’s capacities for intelligence and feelings, and these have supported Christian theologies attempting to reclaim this for churches. Such studies have contributed to a new field of

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23 Temple Grandin, autistic educator and animal activist, has worked to reduce animal suffering in the cattle industry’s systems of moving and slaughtering cattle. She has also worked to reform the human perspective on animals and see them as teachers to help us be more fully human rather than objects to be “broken.” She argues that her autism gave her insights into the way nonhuman animals behave and perceive the world. She suggests that non-autistic people are abstractified in their sensory perceptions and thoughts and tend toward “inattentional blindness” of the concrete details of the visual field around them that prey animals and autistic people catch. See, Grandin, *Animals in Translation* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2005) and Grandin, *Animals Make Use Human* (Boston: Houghton Miflin Harcourt, 2009). Mark Bekoff, animal behaviorist and ethnologist, has done work to show that animals are basically compassionate and empathetic beings capable of making moral decisions (what he calls a sense of “wild justice”). He argues that animals meet most of the standards for the term ‘personhood,’ such as being able to communicate, being conscious of their surroundings, experiencing various emotions, and having a sense of self. He invokes multiple studies and examples from magpie funerals to elephants in mourning to cross-species support of others in distress. See, Bekoff, *The Animal Manifesto*. Also, see Allen Schoen’s veterinarian-spiritual memoir on the co-species connections, *Kindred Spirits*, 151-180. I am not trying to sentimentalize homeless persons and their relationships with animals or make this into the most important bond they have had or will have or to generalize to all homeless anytime they
study, Animal Assisted Therapy, where animals help persons recovering from physical and psychological traumas (Schoen 2001, 59).

Demetrius, Gary, and Mario, three Contributor vendors, took pictures of animals that in different ways mediated God for them. Demetrius, a 45-year-old recently widowed African-American man, has been homeless off and on since 1999. Since finishing high school, he has “had three million jobs.” He says the Contributor has made a difference in giving him “a place to lay his head” with an apartment the past few months, but he does not think it will work out: “It’s in my system to move. My mom was constantly moving and now that I have a place, it makes me ready to go. My wife is dead. I have no one to depend on.” Demetrius is not attending church right now and says he just does not feel “at home” in one. Demetrius photographed the birds he affectionately calls “my own” that he feeds on the street corner at the busy intersection of Hillsboro and Woodmont between two churches (see figure 6.16). He tells me that he likes to take breaks each day and feed the birds in one church parking lot: “They make me so happy, man. I like to feed God’s creatures. Look at how tiny they are. They gotta eat, too. They know who I am. They know when to come and look at me, hopping around. They are counting on me. These little birds are like my pets. I love how they’re so tiny. I do care about them. They are always out here with me.”

have interactions with animals. My point is to show the work done on the good of animals as having moral intelligence and the good of the animal-human bond.
As he talks about this picture, Demetrius recalls his grandparents who took him to a Baptist church when he was young. What they taught him about God and being a person of faith has influenced his care for these birds, some of which is linked to his hopes for the afterlife: “My grandparents taught me to live by the Golden Rule and it will get you into heaven.” In relation to feeding the birds, Demetrius also shared one of his favorite verses that he keeps on a wall at his apartment, Micah 6.8: “I tell people when they come over to read it because this is what carries me, ‘love goodness, walk humbly with God’ and I’m trying to do that here [with feeding the birds]. If I do, He’s got your back and you don’t need to be afraid.” Both verses show Demetrius finds God in a space where he is involved in “everyday virtues of doing good” and emphasize caring.24

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Gary took pictures of his companion animal, Bob the Wonder Cat or Bobby (see figure 6.17).

![Bob the Wonder Cat](image)

Figure 6.17. Bob the Wonder Cat

One reason that his cat makes him feel close to God is the story of how they “found each other.” Robyn, a fellow country music song writer who also owns a store in Hillsboro Village, met Gary as he was walking the streets. She fosters cats and brings them to her store. Gary recounts how he got Bob the Wonder Cat from Robyn:

Robyn told me, ‘You need a cat in your life.’ And she held the cat for me for months until I got into Madison Towers. Meant a lot to me that she wanted me to have him. She could have given him away but she saved him for me. I knew when I saw him, we belonged together. He’s a Wonder Cat because no one really wanted him since he has no tail. So I took him and I love having him. Like Robyn said, ‘I’m might not go to church every Sunday, but I do God’s work in taking care of this cat.’ If I got and can help you, I will, it’s what my grandma and mother taught me.”

Gary shares more about why he sees God in Bobby when he looks at him: “You know there is a God when you see this creature. He is so innocent. And he just loves me no matter what. But he’s also a survivor. Man, Bobbie is on his ninth life, for sure.” Gary
also talked about how Bobby’s presence constituted a sacred space for him because he helps him feel less stressed and because of their relationship involving touch:

Being with Bobby makes me feel more at home in my place. I still feel homeless even though I’m in an apartment. I mean I didn’t even feel comfortable in my own place these first two months. It won’t ever leave my shoes, because I’ll always feel like they could just rip it out from me any day. But, you know, that Bobby is here, waiting to greet me and be with me, stretching out on my bed. Just petting him helps with this stress and worry. I’m not a nice person anymore. I’m angry now and I don’t like that. I just don’t like being around people, but I do okay around Bobby. (see figure 6.18)

![Figure 6.18. Gary and Bob the Wonder Cat](image)

Out of the three (formerly) homeless men, Mario struck me as the most attached to his companion animals and intentional about invoking the divine with them. A 60-year-old twice divorced man with one adult daughter, Mario has lived in Nashville for the past 21 years. Raised by Catholic parents who immigrated from Mexico, Mario grew up in Iowa and fought in the Vietnam War. He casually mentioned that he still suffers from PTSD. He dropped out of college with two years of journalism studies and has held various jobs from landscaping and janitorial work to media videography and
construction. Mario says he became homeless with the recent economic downturn. He does not really stay in touch with his family and calls himself “the aloof one.” I met Mario at a Contributor paper release meeting in DPC’s sanctuary. Mario was hard not to notice as he was accompanied by a huge white 5-year-old Pyrenees, Bear (see figure 6.19). Mario says he likes people, but he prefers the company of his dogs.

Figure 6.19. Bear

Mario told me the story of how he and his four dogs came together:

Two of my dogs I found at a dumping ground for dogs—people just come there to throw their animals out, can you believe that? It was near a house I was working on and saw it happening and couldn’t leave these two there. I took them to a dog park in Kingston Springs. We saw a puppy wandering around. I came back an hour later to see if he was still there, and the Lord told me to take him. I call him ‘Newly’ because he was the new dog of our pack. Bear was the last one of the pack. I was working on a woman’s house and overheard her saying she was taking him to the shelter because she didn’t realize he’d get so big. He’s a Pyrenees—what did she expect? I took one look at him and I told her, ‘He ain’t going to no shelter’ and took him in. I have a soft heart and I love animals. Even the mice in our barn, I can’t kill them. (see figures 6.20-21)
After doing construction work on Ashland City highway, one property owner offered Mario and his dogs an empty barn for shelter. It has no bathroom or kitchen which Mario says makes hygiene difficult, but he makes do with a hose in warm weather and a $3 shower at a truck stop. Mario still considers himself homeless but is grateful for the space so that he can hold onto his dogs: “I don’t need a lot. Just my dogs. I won’t ever go to the Mission because I’d lose them. I’m at peace and happy here.” (see figure 6.22)
Mario says the dogs are his community and have helped make Nashville his community, too, since people take an interest in Bear who accompanies him to sell papers:

I love selling the paper because I’m out there with Bear and people love him. They want to meet him and know about us. He’s helped me to meet some gracious and kind people and make some regular customers who will drive by and get a paper just to say hello to Bear. They bring me packages of stuff for hygiene and dog food. The hair salon owner nearby run out to see Bear and they’ll let him in when we take breaks. The kids love him, especially at Christmas when I put antlers on him. I love showing off my dogs.

Research shows that the non-homeless are more likely to help a homeless person with a pet (Taylor et al 2004), however, the homeless can also be judged for having them through verbal attacks or offers to purchase their pets to give them a better home (Irvine et al 2012). Donations, like the ones Mario is given, can minimize the impact of such stigmatized responses (Irvine et al 2012). According to Snow and Anderson (1993), Bear would be considered an important part of Mario’s identity work as a homeless person because the use of various props, including pets, is one way the homeless manage their stigmatized identities. While Mario views his dogs as a great deal more than a mere prop, his dogs do, indeed, change him into what Goffman calls an “open person,” someone who is more “open” for a face to face engagement among the unacquainted, particularly with another who is not his social equal. With Bear, Mario may be considered by some non-homeless to be more “out of role” as to how they stereotype the
homeless (as lacking the desire to be responsible for another, for instance) and so others may feel more comfortable about approaching him.  

Mario does not go to church right now; church was not helpful to him growing up, except for the Salvation Army that provided his family with Christmas presents. He remembers “very stern nuns and priests who told me I was going to hell” as well as the church spaces themselves that “felt so cold, that old stone and marble feeling” and turned him off from wanting to attend a church today. “My church needs to be outside with my dogs,” says Mario, “where I feel more comfortable, more free, where I don’t feel threatened.” He adds that he prefers to pray in the dog park or in front of the barn both of which he has referred to as “church” (see figure 6.23).

Figure 6.23. Bear at Centennial Park, a “church”

25 Goffman, *Behavior in Public Places* (New York: Free Press, 1966), 126. Also see, Irvine et al, “Confrontations and Donations,” 25-35, where she relies on both Goffman and Snow and Anderson to lay out the issues of a stigmatized identity for the homeless that a pet can counter or cause.
Mario’s interactions with his dogs provides him with opportunities to express gratitude and petitions to God for their continued well-being. He enacts a ritual of blessing with them each morning on the farm. Remembering his Catholic mother’s own blessing of him and his sister, he now bestows it upon his dogs with his own kind of parental love:

I bless them every morning. I remember my mom always used to do this. She’d have us get on our knees and bless us that we’d be taken care of and be okay. I make the sign of the cross on their furry heads and ask God in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit to help my dogs to make it through the day. I’ll take their paw. And I thank Him for the dogs and ask Him to keep us healthy and together. When Bear and I get out to our [street selling] spot, I ask that Bear and I have a good working day and I cross him again, just like the baseball player does going out to bat, but I do it on Bear before we work.

As Mario tells me this, he begins to tear up. He talks some about another picture (see figure 6.24) and explains:

I get a little emotional sometimes, that’s all. When it comes to my dogs, I love them so much. They mean a lot to me. They are my family. They give me so much. They love me no matter what. I feel closer to God with my animals. God has blessed me with them. The Lord knew there was a void in my life and they fill it. Who rescued who? It’s hard to tell. Them or me.

Figure 6.24. “Who rescued who?”
Demetrius, Gary, and Mario all show how having companion animals help the homeless normalize their lives and feel close to the divine. Because they are so “tiny”—or what I hear as fragile and vulnerable—and because he wants to follow the Golden Rule and Micah, Demetrius enjoys feeding his birds, an act not dissimilar from God’s in the Psalms where we can find God feeding the animals in every season and literally from the palm of God’s hand (Psalm 104.27 and Psalm 145.16). For Mario, touch can be a moment of blessing connecting him not just to the transcendent in his feelings of gratitude and love for his dogs, but also linking him to his mother who once blessed him in that way, while for Gary, the tactile sensation of the animal’s fur helps relieve some of his stress he feels in fearing a return to homelessness. Looking at Bobby and seeing some goodness and experiencing a sense unconditional love, Gary is reminded of God’s existence. Feeling deeply habituated to not having a home, Gary finds Bobby’s presence of greeting and simply being near to help make him feel more at home. Bobby also is a reminder of another person’s trust in Gary to be responsible for a sentient creature. While Gary particularly identified with and perhaps drew strength from his image of his cat being a survivor, a kind of miracle or “wonder” (hence the cat’s name), all three men seem to either empathize with their animals’ vulnerability and need to be cared for in a world that might overlook hungry birds or discard a cat without a tail or dogs that grow too big. As such, they extend themselves to care for creatures, particularly Gary and Mario with creatures they see are unwanted. Both Gary and Mario talk about their pets as mutually rescuing one another. They think their animals share connections with them and are “meant for” them and Mario even sees them as sent from God, as evidenced
when Newley was still in the park waiting to be gathered up with the rest of Mario’s pack. They describe their care for their companion animals as doing the work of God and interpret their encounters with animals through a biblical lens or based on what their grandparents or mother taught them.

All three grew up in church, but no longer attend one and find they feel closer to God in the presence of their creatures and caring for them—that, as Mario says, becomes church. All three at some point acknowledged a struggle to be in community with other humans or a feeling of isolation: Demetrius says he has no one to depend on, Gary has admitted hating people, particular those at his former church and does not trust them, and Mario, maybe as a part of his PTSD as a Vietnam veteran, says he tends to be aloof and does not naturally reach out to people. Out of these difficulties, they may not feel they can risk turning to other humans but they can turn to their animal companions to gain a sense of loyalty, trust, and even unconditional love. While none of them explicitly said that God was in such feelings, I wonder, as these animals embody such attributes, if they do not come to associate the loyalty, trust, and unconditional love with God I see immanent in these encounters.

As practicing companionship with animals emerged as an important activity for these three men from their photos, it is worth pointing out that historically Christian theology has conceptually built on Western philosophy to avoid seeing a relationship between animals and humans or God.26 Reframings of the role of animals in Christian

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26 In early Western philosophy, the distinction between humanity and all other creatures was made as early as Plato who felt only humans had a second, immortal soul with an
theology have looked to some voices remembered in mainstream Christian teachings, like St. Francis of Assisi who saw creatures as a possible source for wisdom and reconciliation.27 Another voice helpful for reconceptualizing the role of animals for the life of faith has been one from the margins, Celtic theologian John Scotus Erigena who thought delighting in creatures was a way to imitate God and that both humans and animals are rooted in God—created from rather than opposed to God from whom they both “flow together.”28 Finally, Eastern Orthodox Monks and Nuns of New Skete have broadened our notion of companionship to include dogs. For over thirty years, dogs have

ability to reason and connect to the divine and then Aristotle who said animals lacked emotion and reason. In early Christianity, Augustine solidified the tradition’s denial of a relationship between humans and animals and any part animals might play in theology as he taught that a life of piety required one to renounce the things of the natural world in order to embrace the things of God. In the Enlightenment, Descartes contended that animals are like machines without consciousness, feeling, or choice, a terrible theory that scientists used to justify their own torturous experiments on animals. Some 19th and 20th century theologians in North America honed all of this with the notion that salvation is purely individual and meant only for humans. See Schoen, Kindred Spirits, 18-19 and Judy Skeen, “Predator-Prey Relationships: What Humans can Learn from Horses about Being Whole,” in The Psychology of the Human-Animal Bond: A Resource for Clinicians and Researchers, ed. Christopher Blazina, Guler Boyraz and David Shen Miller (New York: Springer Science and Business Press, 2011), 97-99.

27 See Skeen, “Predator-Prey,” 98-99. Also, for tales of St Francis and animals, see Laura Hobgood-Oster, The Friends We Keep: Unleashing Christianity’s Compassion for Animals (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2010), 90-1 and Wendy Wright, “For all the Saints,” The Weavings Reader: Living with God in the World, edited by John Mogabgab (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1993), 49-51. Hobgood-Oster and Wright shares stories of St Francis telling of his close relationships to animals from preaching to the birds to saving a wolf from an angry village.

28 Phillip Newell, Christ of the Celts: The Healing of Creation (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 9-11. Newell who has worked to reclaim Celtic traditions for those interested in gaining Christian understandings on creation recounts Erigena’s writings as a way to heal this dualism. Erigena theologizes that Christ calls the true nature of humanity to be a part of the natural world where grace is found. Also see Skeen, “Predator-Prey,” 99-100.
been a part of their monastic communities and they see their relationships with their dogs as key to their spiritual life. They believe that dogs invite us to reach out beyond ourselves and come into relationship with the mystery of God in all creation.29

Being companions with creatures for humans and God has scriptural foundations. There is the second creation story in Genesis where God makes animals to be named by and provide company for Adam. In Job’s Divine Encounter, God talks joyfully of the Leviathan and Behemoth, almost as if playmates, and God’s monologue aims for Job to see that God creates, cares for and contains the mysteries of wildly beautiful non-human creatures and this is a cause for human humility.30 Dogs show compassion to Lazarus the beggar in Luke. Animals in Jonah as well as Balaam’s talking donkey in Numbers show non-human creatures to be attuned to God’s voice; in short, scripture shows animals are valuable to God for delight and instruction to humans about their world, their call as God’s people and God’s self. Indeed, biblical witness reveals a God who “creates with companions in mind.”31

If stigmatization happens in social interactions, a God of Companionship that Demetrius, Gary, and Mario experience to varying degrees in their relationships with animals can begin to heal such dis-grace and make room for them to be more than matter out of place. Whether it is feeding the birds at a street corner, taking in a tail-less cat, or rescuing four dogs and working with one of them, these (formerly) homeless men feel

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31 Hobgood-Olster, *Friends*, 3.
that when they are with these creatures, they matter, or have the “perception that to some degree and in any of a variety of ways, [they] are a significant part of the world around us.”\textsuperscript{32} Social psychological research on mattering, the extent to which we feel we make a difference in the world, has identified three main ways we feel we matter: we matter because others are aware of or attend to us, because others invest in us and because we can provide others with resources (Elliot et al 2004, 339).

These three features of mattering are true to a certain degree with Demetrius, they are even more so with Gary and Mario. They talk about the delight they get from the presence and touch of their animals who notice them and want their attention and affection. They talk about their pets providing some emotional support and the pets remind them of or bring them to experience human support. For Gary, Bobby reminds him of Robin’s trust in him as responsible pet owner and for Mario, Bear’s presence at work brings him positive regard from non-homeless persons admiring his dog and interested in supporting him for his attachment to Bear. Both men claim that even as they have saved these unwanted animals, the roles change and they find themselves being rescued or saved by their animals who respond to their own vulnerabilities,\textsuperscript{33} and for Mario and Gary, even offering unconditional love. Finally, even with their limited resources, they care for their animals who (conceivably and noted by Gary) miss them when they are gone. Not only do their companion animals matter to them, but they


\textsuperscript{33} The Monks at New Skete make this same point. See \textit{I and God}, 73.
matter to their pets. Feeling like they matter to their animals can help them manage their stigmatized identities (Irvine et al 2012), and as seen from their photos, their animals provide opportunities for them to encounter the sacred. Indeed, their animals seem to make them more fully human. As such, God’s redemption here is enfleshed in animals.

*Sacred Space found in Caring Interactions and in the Body*

Photos by the homeless showed their experiencing sacred space through caring interactions and relationships. Even in their “walking exile” (de Certeau 1986), their pictures show they experienced God through care, both in the receiving of support and in giving it. Four men, Coyote, Demetrius, Gary, and Bud all experienced care from others as opportunities to feel close to the divine.

I have not mentioned Coyote’s photos yet because all of his photos fell in this category and showed him with people he called friends supporting him through his struggles with schizophrenia. Repeatedly, Coyote used the words “empathy” and “not judging me” to name what he saw in his pictures (see figures 6.25-27). One picture shows researchers at Vanderbilt who have paid him to be in studies on schizophrenia. Coyote feels in God’s presence with them not only because they help provide him with a way to produce income but also for their wanting to improve his life “and talking to [him] like he isn’t crazy.” One of his pictures from a walk to raise funds for mental illness research shows him with a woman has befriended him. Coyote thinks that her being a “peaceful quiet Quaker” with a schizophrenic son makes her predisposed to showing compassion. He says she has become his “second mother” who “loves me just like I am even for all my problems that make society tell me I’m no one.”
Figures 6.25 and 6.26. Care from researchers on mental illness and a “second mother”

Another picture shows the Living Room group (see fig 6.27) where Coyote says he comes “to be with empathetic people. They listen to me each week. They took me in and were with me at my low points and when I was so angry and love me and let me love back.”

Figure 6.27. Being with the Living Room

Coyote says any space where he is with persons who “see past my mental illness and my homeless track record” is where he feels close to God. Such persons help him to realize “I can’t make it on my own. I’m not an island unto myself. I need people. Maybe that is why God brought me through homelessness—to tell me I need others.” While I do not
agree with Coyote that the cause of his homelessness comes from God who wants to teach Coyote a lesson, Coyote’s own belief gives him a sense that his hard time has a purpose for God’s greater good.

Demetrius’s pictures of receiving care from others came while he was selling *The Contributor*. Children of his regular customers who make him laugh and bring him cookies and young persons who stop and want to buy a paper and talk make him feel God’s presence. In those moments, he says, “They put a smile on my face. They make my day. I see certain people like these that God brings into my life and I know they from God. I just feel so happy, so thankful. I think God wants me to feel happy.” Positive relations with customers who show support brings Demetrius a sense of well-being that God desires for him and allow him to practice gratitude for what he does have (see fig 6.28).

Figure 6.28. *The Contributor* Customers

Bud took a picture of himself with his teenage daughter (see figure 6.29).
I expected Bud to focus on his love and care for her, but instead he talked about how he feels when he experiences her knowing him without any shame of his homelessness:

“She doesn’t know that I’m homeless. Lord, I don’t want her to know. I pray she won’t ever know and I can get out of this before she does. I wish I weren’t. My mom and her mom haven’t told her that I don’t have a place or a job. So, when we together, there’s nothing for her to be ashamed of or worried about. She still looks up to me as her daddy.”

I was surprised to find Gary took pictures of caring persons because when he took his camera, he insisted none of his sacred space pictures would have people: “I have no faith in people. God is not among them.” Gary’s comment came out of a particular experience with an Assembly of God church where he both worked as a janitor and sang in the choir but did not receive any help:
When I went to church regularly, it wasn’t a test of my faith. It was a test of my faith in people. The pastor was always preaching on the poverty level in Nashville being at 22,000. Well, then why in the hell are you paying me 18,000 a year? Why don’t you go on and do it for the Lord? And he makes a quarter of a million. Largest Assembly of God church in Tennessee with a roomy budget. People are so full of shit. They’d talk to me about fixing their houses or building a deck. But they were just taking to me just to talk to me so they could feel good about themselves. It’s all crap. I don’t believe a damn thing anyone says anymore, I swear I don’t. It’s like yada yada yada. Just shut up. They go live like the devil or don’t give a rat’s ass the rest of the week. Just bugs me cause I really try to help people now and I don’t have anything to give.

Despite his denunciation of humanity based on his recent church experience, his pictures did have persons who at some point showed him support and care that made a difference. As Gary walked around Nashville’s midtown, it brought him into contact with persons such as Robin, a former singer/songwriter and Hillsboro Village merchant who not only gave him Bob the Wonder cat, but also gave him a place to go after he was released from the hospital from his leg amputation. She invited Gary to stay at her home in Pulaski for six weeks as he did rehab. He says “she adopted me for a while, like one of her cats.” (see fig 6.30)

Gary also pictured two women, Ann and Arnelle on staff at Belmont United Methodist Church (see fig 6.31), because they helped him get his current housing. They acted as a reference when housing wanted to turn him down due to a recent addition on his criminal record: “I beat up my buddy with my ball bat cause he took my last 20 dollars. I put the bat to his head. He bled, called the police, even messed his pants cause I scared him bad. So I got turned down for my housing.” Gary explains why he lashed out, “Look, I’m not a criminal, but if you steal from me, I will hurt you. That’s my mantra. I’m just so mad at the world right now, it’s just pitiful. But you got Ann and Arnelle at BUM. They been
real good to me. They vouched for me so I could get housing. I come and talk to them. They are doing God’s work.”

Gary shared what makes him feel being with these three women make God real for him:

Having friends is real important. Just cause I turned 40 in jail for no driver’s license and became homeless in Nashville, society wadded me up and threw me away. Without them I wouldn’t have made it this far. These people just love on me and care about me. The homeless, you know, it’s ore than give a meal here or clothes there. Gotta be right there with them and help them get back to feeling like a real person again. They all took a chance on me.

These women remind him of what his mother taught him about being a Christian: “My mom was raised Methodist. She took me to church and taught me about God. She taught me you practice what you are taught and if it wasn’t up on the list, it doesn’t get done as an adult. It’s not on the list to throw people away, now is it?” Gary thinks they also are living out his favorite bible verse, the one that he says is his guiding principle from Romans 13.8-9: “Owe no one anything except to love one another…For the
commandments are summed up in this word: You shall love your neighbors as yourself.’
That just about covers everything, doesn’t it?”

Finally, two homeless persons took pictures of themselves to show that God cares
for their bodies, as do they. Bud said rather proudly about his self-portrait at RITI
Campus, “See, how clean cut I am? I just felt better with a new shirt, a nice clean shave.
This here is a beautiful picture of myself. This is how God sees me. Yes, I’ve been in
jail and on the streets. Don’t mean God didn’t make me beautiful.” He jokingly adds, “I
only got one of these and sometimes it felt like all I got.” (see figure 6.32)

Figure 6.32. Self-portrait of Bud

Like Bud, Gary took a picture of himself, but he focused on one part of his body:
his artificial leg. (see fig 6.33)
Gary’s understanding of his body with this leg as sacred has different dimensions. When Gary looks at his leg, he sees the embodiment of his loss: “Look at it on me. One big hard time. Right here.” As I mentioned in Chapter 3 on the Living Room, Gary lost his leg three years ago after the city’s flood. After working some construction jobs that came open with post flood rebuilding projects, he developed a gout infection in his big toe that spread to his entire leg. Gary says the pain changed him and describes an onset of depression:

Felt like battery acid glued to my leg. I knew I wouldn’t die because dying would be an improvement to my pain. The pain took something out of me. I’m not the same guy I used to be. I still got the drive, the mental attitude and I don’t really make excuses. But once you get down, it’s hard to get up and I’ve been down for so long, down sometimes feels like up.

He recalls feeling both sustenance from God’s presence and the desolation of God’s absence when he cried out to God. Gary “felt God’s presence real strong” in his hospital room, and describes it: “The bible says they send you a Comforter and it felt like someone was in the room with me all the time, even when no one was there. I kept praying, ‘Help me, I don’t know what I’m going to do.’ And visitors came to keep me
company, like Robin and my church lady friends.” However, when Gary has asked God why he had to lose his leg, and so also lose construction work opportunities, he does not feel God has been listening. Even though his prayers have been answered before with televangelism, Gary is unsure if God has a plan for him:

I’ve had prayers answered—the 700 Club, I know the tv pastor healed my wife that night because after I prayed with the tv, the tumor on her ovaries disappeared. I’ve asked the Lord, ‘I know I’m supposed to be learning something here, what is it you’re trying to teach me?’ I’m not sure He’s been around. This is nuts what I’m going through. It has no sensibilities at all. If I had designed my life this wouldn’t have been in the plans at all. They say the Lord puts you where you’re supposed to be all the time. Huh, we’ll see about that. He and I are going head to head when he shows up.

Finally, though, Gary calls his body with this leg a sacred space not just because of the hard time and struggle with God over what it means, but because, as he repeatedly has said to me about his homelessness and here, “Look at me now. I feel like I’m supposed to testify and turn this negative into a positive. What was meant for death and destruction should show life and production. I want to see that in me walking on it.”

Making the Body a Sacred “Memory Place”: Tattoos as Embodied Spiritual Practice

As Bud said in the previous section, all you have is your own body. Many of the homeless make a sacred space out of their own body with tattoos. Or, put another way, the sacred things they carry are as close as their skin. Sometimes the homeless pointed to their tattoos as a thing that made them feel stronger in their faith and closer to the transcendent and loved ones now assumed to be with God. None of the tattoos were simply described as just representing a particular Christian belief. Like the photographs, the tattoos have stories behind them as they inscribe on their wearer’s skin memories of
beloved family and hard times and hope sustained through it. A few homeless persons gave me permission to photograph their tattoo; when they did, I share those pictures.

Before I discuss tattoos as an embodied spiritual practice of the homeless, it is worth noting that a few homeless persons were vehemently opposed to being tattooed, not because of some biblical injunction against marking, like the one often quoted in Leviticus 19.28, but because tattoos might signal to potential employers that they were untrustworthy. Coyote told me he would never get a tattoo because he has already been to jail “and doesn’t want anything that looks remotely criminal.” He adds, “I’m trying to be a normal member of society and find work. It’s already hard enough. I don’t need another strike against me. I feel close to God in other ways.” Toni, who had tattooed herself years ago as a part of her artwork now regrets doing that and blames her tattoos on her difficulty finding employment: “People associate tattoos with delinquency and rebellion.” She wishes she could express her art and her faith through tattoos and said she has imagined having one of the Virgin Mary or the archangel Michael, both of whom she associates with innocence and protecting children against evil. However, she decided against it and says, “the reality is, it’s not possible for me. If I could remove them all, I would.” Her response indicates that her fear of compounding her homeless

34 Like Toni, Anita regrets her tattoo: “Peachez” and a peach inscribed high above her left breast. She explains that Peachez was her street name and associates it with her substance abuse and homelessness: “it reminds me of when I was a different person. I want to forget it. I wasn’t Anita.” Anita could frame the tattoo as a part of her journey that shows her how far she has come, as Toni at the Living Room does with her drug needle scars (See Chapter 3), but she does not.
stigmatization she already faces must outweigh her desire to have a tattoo expressing her faith.

Toni and Coyote show that despite the broad appeal tattoos find today, there are still strong associations with deviance.\textsuperscript{35} In Western history, tattoos have been a “metaphor of difference,” often in a negative way with pain, danger, exoticism, and sexuality. Over time they have been linked with society’s underbelly, the marginal, unconventional, and the working class: slaves, criminal males, sailors and miners, soldiers, circus entertainers, prostitutes (wearing love tokens or signaling their ownership by names of their pimps) and even more recently in the late 20\textsuperscript{th} century, bikers and gangs.\textsuperscript{36} Further, scholarship historically has shown a deviance bias against tattooing (Adams 2009). For example, medical researchers suggested tattoos could indicate a predisposition to substance abuse, aggression and impulsiveness, sexual orientation, or sexual disorders.\textsuperscript{37} A high number of tattoos among the criminal population was explained by their bodies being naturally less sensitive to pain, a sign of their own


immorality.\textsuperscript{38} Tattoos have also been associated with disease such as Hepatitis C or HIV.\textsuperscript{39} Late 19\textsuperscript{th} and early 20\textsuperscript{th} century psychiatric theories contended that getting tattoos could increase one’s sexual libido to dangerous levels.\textsuperscript{40} Thus, when Toni and Coyote tell me that tattoos could impede their finding employment and are incredulous about it expressing their faith, they reveal not only that a deviance bias against tattoos still exists but also that they are aware they must manage their own stigmatized identities from being homeless, unemployed, or incarcerated. Already they can be considered “Other” to mainstream middle class American social norms and don’t need another mark.

Still, in spite of its history of stigmatized associations, tattoos have shifted to becoming fashionable among the American middle class.\textsuperscript{41} One only has to look at popular media pictures to see this is the case among models, movie stars, and sports figures. Recently, young Evangelical Christians have participated in this “tattoo renaissance” and use them to proclaim their religious identity and commitments.\textsuperscript{42}

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\textsuperscript{39} Haley and Fischer, 2001 and Braithwaite et al., 1999. Found in Adams, “Marked Difference,” 274. \\
\textsuperscript{40} Van Dinter refers to a late 19\textsuperscript{th} century Italian psychiatrist, Cesare Lombroso, who asserted a link between the criminal psyche and physical traits, like tattoos. His theory was used by early 20\textsuperscript{th} century psychiatrist Fredrich Krauss who claimed tattoos affected the sexual psyche, increasing a man’s sexual power and attraction to women and increasing a woman’s submissiveness and sexual appetite. van Dinter, \textit{The World}, 45. \\
\textsuperscript{41} DeMello, \textit{Bodies of Inscription}, 2000. \\
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Likewise, the homeless I encountered who use tattoos as a part of their faith are working out of a tradition that shows tattoo practices carrying both positive and negative valences. Scholarship on tattoos has noted its spiritual meaning for Christians over history. Marking the body can be traced back to physical marks of punishment, as seen in the apostle Paul who declared that he carried the stigmata of the Lord Jesus on his body as a way of enduring his slavery to Christ (Gal.6.17). When early Christians received ill-treatment for their beliefs, they could look to Paul as an authority and so see their bruises and welts not as degrading punitive marks, but as affirmation of their loyalty to and participation with their Lord Christ in his suffering at the crucifixion. From this comes the later conception of stigmata whereby Christians who suffer with Jesus will develop miraculous marks on their bodies as seen in the well known earliest example of St Francis of Assisi and his “Five Wounds.” Of course, tattooing also reveals the sins of the church in Christians from American slave owners branding their chattel to European missionaries branding New World indigenous people as belonging to the body of Christ and so, paradoxically, church property. Such tattoos were sources of shame (van Dinter 2005, 11). English criminals during the 17th and 18th centuries being shipped to penal

43 Paul Connerton, *The Spirit of Mourning: History, Memory and the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 141. Connerton takes Paul literally in his declaration of bearing wounds from his evangelical missions. Some biblical scholars like Charles Ensminger at Drew University agree with this assertion and take it further—that Paul thought he personified Jesus and bore the wounds of Christ. See, Charles Ensminger, “Paul the Stigmatic,” *Institute for Higher Critical Studies* 8, no. 2 (Fall 2001) 183-209. Some mid 20th century biblical scholars (such as Donald Guthrie in his 1969 commentary on Galatians) think Paul was talking about metaphorical marks of experience as an evangelist and was not endorsing tattoo as a religious practice, although this is how some Christians today read it in order to authorize their being tattooed.

44 Connerton, *The Spirit of Mourning*, 141; Caplan *Written on the Body*, xvii.
colonies in Australia often had religious tattoos, commonly choosing images of hope with anchors based on Hebrews 6.9 or slain lambs to draw parallels to Christ’s sufferings.⁴⁵

Christian tattoos often were in a class of pilgrimage practices. Records as early as the 5th century from Gaza and as late as the 17th century from England show that pilgrims tattooed themselves after traveling to the Holy Land with words like “Jerusalem” or Christian symbols such as the fish, cross, and chi rho as honorary emblems giving proof of their completed pilgrimage and a sign of service to their Lord.⁴⁶ Such pilgrimage tattoos could also serve as tactile reminders of where travelers had come into contact with the Divine through a journey with other fellow Christians and in the devotion shown to relics. This tradition has continued in Loretto, Italy, a site for visiting the Madonna dell’Oreto whose image along with St Francis, pierced hearts, and rosaries can be tattooed on pilgrims finishing their journey (van Dinter 2005, 40; Caplan 2000, xviii). In the medieval period, tattooing was also used in exorcisms for healing and until the 20th century, a tattooing tradition was considered a rite of passage for Catholics girls in Albania and Bosnia (van Dinter 2005, 39).

That brief description of the origins of Christian tattoos and ways they have worked as a religious practice offers some sense of the place tattoos have had in Christians’ lived faith as I now explore tattoos many homeless named as sacred things.

⁴⁶ Connerton, The Spirit of Mourning, 141; Caplan, Written on the Body, xviii; van Dinter, The World, 38
Consider Billy, a *Contributor* vendor, who names his tattoo as sacred because it reminds him of his grandparent and scripture, and helps him keep his faith strong (see fig 6.34).

![Figure 6.34. Billy’s Dragon tattoo](image)

On his arm, Billy has a tattoo of a dragon (and 32 crescent moons not included in picture) and plans to get another tattoo of the yin and yang. As Billy mentioned in Chapter 5 about the *Contributor*, he sees himself as having a “guardian spirit” who can take care of himself and others, be it his girlfriend, their pets, or some of his customers and other homeless persons in need of a word of encouragement or some help. This “guardian spirit” is part of the tattoo’s significance. As Billy talked about what the tattoo meant to him, family memories, tarot cards (another of his sacred things), and the bible all wove together for him:

See, my grandma gave me my first set of tarot cards. I still have her set. They are universal symbols, like the dragon and moon. They bring me clarity of mind, just like they did for my grandma when she’d read them at her house. The moons are rebirth, new life. And there’s the dragon, wisdom and power. It is the good guardian against evil
spirits. It protects. Like Samson. That’s my favorite bible story. His strength wasn’t in his hair. It was in his faith in God. And he saved people with his strength. I had to be strong to survive all the abuse from my dad. He was a piece of work. A drug dealer who put us on welfare.

Based on his tarot cards, Billy’s dragon-moons tattoo gives him a sense of identity that he associates with a biblical hero and judge, Samson. He identifies with the dragon’s power and also with Samson’s strength of faith, a strength that he says got him through his abusive childhood. Billy’s tattoo also seems to connect him to his grandmother who gave him the cards. It is a sign for him of his desired identity: being a man of wisdom (he hopes to have inherited from his grandmother) and a man who can protect others and himself with his strength of faith in God, like Samson.

Like Billy, Sandy’s tattoo reminds him of deceased family and scripture, gives him a sense of identity, and serves to strengthen him and his faith. Sandy’s tattoo on his arm (see fig 6.35). It shows a cross intertwined with a ribbon and his mother’s dates.

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47 According to van Dinter, the dragon in South Asian religions guards the heavens from evil spirits and represents power and wisdom, as Billy says. van Dinter, *The World*, 75, 80. Billy was emphatic that tarot reading came out of his grandmother’s Italian heritage and did not see it tarot cards as New Age or in conflict with his own Christian commitments.
He explains that he primarily got it to commemorate his mother’s life. When he was five, she was killed in a car accident:

To me, it means the life and death of a woman. Even though I didn’t get to know her like lots did, during the time she was alive, I was in her life and she made sure I was taken care of. Even if that meant working two jobs or putting herself in harm’s way when her boyfriend came at me to protect me from him. She was always looking out for my best interest. I thought that was fitting with the cross because Jesus does that with me now. Did that with me dying for my sins.”

According to Connerton, tattoos serve as “memory codes.” They are powerful locations of memory for individuals because, as Connerton quotes one Seattle tattoo

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48 Connerton usually invokes Bourdieu’s theory of habitus in his work, but with tattoos, he cautions that they may not best be understood as examples of bodily habitus. If Bourdieu defines habitus as a way societies can protect the ideals they want to transmit by placing them out of reach of conscious, voluntary change, then Connerton contends that tattoos, when deliberately chosen, “transgress, rather than exemplify” bodily habitus. As such, Connerton suggests that Frances Yates’ work on memory among the ancients in her Art of Memory (2001) is a more apt concept than Bourdieu’s for thinking about tattoos as memory codes. I bring this up because thus far in my project, I have relied on Bourdieu’s model of bodily habitus and Connerton’s use of it with incorporate
artist, getting “‘tattooed tends to develop a person’s awareness of memory’” as the tattoo acts as a referential point that “‘reinforce the self and its history.’” Connerton also calls the skin “a kind of external biographical memory, a system of inbuilt ‘memory places’” where a person can recreate her history as a site of recalled events and relationships (133). Sandy’s skin has become such a “memory place” that recreates his history with his mother through his tattoo. As Sandy talks about the tattoo, he brings up his grandfather and bible reading. Sandy’s maternal grandfather was a pastor in Covington, GA and he grew up going to his church: “Grandpa and Grandma taught me God loved me for who I was and not for what I had or what I did. If I believed in God, he’d be there for me in my troubles.” He mentions his favorite bible verse, Philippians 4.13, “I can do all things in Christ who strengthens me.” Sandy says that the verse gives him a lot of his strength “because without Christ I wouldn’t want to go on trying to make it. I get so tired, so worn down.”

For Sandy, this tactile “memory code” reinforces who he is—loved by his grandfather, his mother, and his Lord. If the homeless work to “salvage the self” or an identity threatened by stigmatization as well as the violence of street life (Snow and Anderson 1993), then the tattoo is one small but concrete way for Sandy to hold onto himself because it helps him remember that he was and remains valuable to his family passed on, family who taught him he was valuable to God. His tattoo seems to help him tell a narrative of his past and present identity that amounts to more than a Devalued Self traditioning, and I do not want readers to assume that I am interpreting tattoos here as such. Connerton, The Spirit of Mourning, 143-44.
that some homeless persons perceive themselves to be (Boydell 2000). Moreover, as Sandy relates the tattoo to his favorite bible verse, it gives him strength to keep on. It recalls for him his mother’s strength she showed in her working two shifts and physically stepping between him and an abusive man in order to care for him. In the image of the crucified Jesus, I see Jesus’ power of life over death on the cross running parallel to Sandy’s mother’s own strength and power of life over death. Moreover, Jesus, like his mother, wanted to protect him and has “his best interests” at heart. Sandy almost sounds like he is describing his tattoo as having sacramental quality here, revealing God’s invisible grace in a tangible sign that marks his body: “I know I’m a sinner, but God is loving and loving me no matter what I do. I can’t see God, but I know God is here and watching over me, with my momma. All I have to do is look here [at the tattoo] to know God’s love and power.”

Other homeless persons had mourning tattoos. Jimmy inscribed his mother’s dates with a cross and rose on his arm. Anita has a rose imprinted on her back in memory of her deceased mother. Annie’s arm bears the marks of her children’s names who died. Dominique has a star tattoo on her ankle to represent her brother who died when he was 8-years-old; she chose a star because “it is beautiful and in the heavens near God” and

49 Brother D, a Living Room leader-in-training, identifies his bullet wound scars as “real tattoos” and describes them sacramentally as well. However, I footnote his experience since he is neither homeless nor formerly homeless. Brother D told me “I got real tattoos in my bullet holes. I got real marks that I’m covered in God’s grace. They remind me by the grace of God, I am still here. Want to see how rough life on the streets can be, look at these.” He reminded me of Sandy in their shared emphasis on their “tattoos” being a visible sign of God’s love or grace and a reminder that God protects him and sees him through hard times.
did one for her unborn child as well so “they wouldn’t be lonely and I can be closer to them.” Dominique’s mother Latanya, inscribed the boy’s name on her shoulder. Tattoos are “mobile inscriptions” that a person carries wherever she goes because they are permanent and are “‘unambiguously a part of you.’” As indelible art, tattoos convey permanence. This is what sets apart tattoos from other practices meant to transform the body such as piercings, plastic surgery, dressing, or perfuming. This feature of bodily permanence is part of what makes a bereavement tattoo work as a sign of our attachments to another: “Tattoos represent a bond between the body of the individual and the object towards which the individual’s emotions are expressed…Tattoos act symbolically as emotional signifiers implying strength of attachment and a token against absence.”

Sandy and the others mentioned get bereavement tattoos as a sign of the emotional attachment to or a “token” against the absence of deceased loved ones.

Their tattoos are practices of embodied bereavement where they honor the sacredness of the loved one’s absent body that profoundly touched them—literally and metaphorically. Consider Annie’s and Dominique’s tattoos of their young children’s names. Noting the great relationship of semantics between external touching and inner feeling (for example, says Connerton, a ‘tactless’ person “getting under one’s skin”), Connerton suggests that tattoos literalize intensely felt experiences (133). Annie talked about wanting “to keep my daughter close. She was so tiny. I know she’s with God, but


I don’t want to forget her now that she’s with God. The way she smelled as a baby. My other one was a miscarriage and I like to imagine who she would have been, what she would have looked like.” Dominique said her son’s name went on her shoulder because she wanted it “close forever” to where his head used to touch as she held him. Their tattoos seem, indeed, to literalize their embodied experiences of motherhood and help them to recapture a lost affective experience and holy tangibility of their children.52

Sometimes the tattoos between a parent and living child represented a strong connection in times of an absence not due to death but hard times in life. I just referred to the bereavement tattoos of Dominique and Latanya for their brother/son. As I noted in Chapter 5 about the Wednesday worship service, Dominique, is a pregnant unmarried 19-year-old and her mother, Latanya, is an unmarried 37-year-old. They are African American and have been staying at the Mission for about a year. Latanya said that her tattoos of the names of family (her deceased son and father as well as her living daughter) are part of where she feels close to God these days as she walks and talks to Jesus:

I like to walk for peace and quiet. I don’t rush back to the Mission. I take my time walking and sometimes I like to look at my wrist [with her daughter’s name]. And I like to talk to Jesus, ask him to keep taking the taste [of drugs] out of my mouth so I don’t have my daughter taken away again and he done it. I ask him to get housing to keep my daughter near and he done it—I’m on the list to get out of the Mission.

52 In a recent piece, Lauren Winner argues that people get bereavement tattoos because we live in a culture that has privatized death and such tattoos try to replace our lost embodied bereavement practices such as clothing and adorning of jewelry. Winner, “From Black Crepe to Blue Ink: Mourning Tattoos and the Practice of Embodied Bereavement,” in The Many Ways We Talk about Death in Society eds. Margaret Souza and Christine Staudt, (New York: Mellen Press, 2009), 135-148.
Dominique spent most of her youth in the state’s custody and living in foster homes because her mother had struggled with substance abuse and her grandmother’s home was too crowded with other family. Seeing her life as parallel to the Old Testament book of Ruth, Latanya went into more detail about what having Dominique’s name on her wrist meant to her: “I like Ruth. She stay with Naomi to help her. She stuck with her.” She quoted a verse to me from Ruth about “where you go, I will go, your god will be my god,” and said, “I’m sticking with my God and my daughter. So, that’s why her name here (looking at one wrist) and mine here (looking at her other wrist). Sticking together.”

Tattoos of the homeless I observed also had an incarnational function: they provided a way for a few homeless women to claim their bodies as sacred. The reasons their bodies were considered sacred were varied. As Dominique explained why her tattoos were a sacred thing, she told me that traditional activities of faith have not been helpful—reading the bible, singing, belonging to a church community, even praying where she feels God’s unresponsiveness to her need and inaction shows a divine absence: “I have no time to pray since I’ve been homeless. Even if I pray, it don’t seem to help. Even when I cry, it don’t change. God must have been with someone else while I was in state custody or asking for a job at Walmart.” However, tattoos are something Dominique names as helpful and are sacred to her—the “pretty stars near God” expressing an attachment to her deceased brother, her unborn child, and her mother with whom she is re-united after years in foster care—but, also, she says, “they make me feel pretty.” She did not elaborate, so I was left wondering if they brought her a feeling of
being lovely (and perhaps a felt capacity of being loved) and so her tattoos were an embodied practice of loveliness, a way to permanently imbue her body with some beauty. Her sense of heightened physical attractiveness from her tattoos may give her more of a sense of value about her body as sacred. Dominique did not explicitly talk about God in her body’s tattooed beauty, but if her tattoos are sacred and something is made sacred because of its connections to the divine, I see her tattoos as written reminders of her God-given loveliness.

Latanya’s tattoo of her name reminds her that her body is sacred for a wholly different reason. She says she tattooed her name on her wrist “in case something happens to me.” Keenly aware of her own mortality as she lives in homelessness, Latanya explained: “I be worried cause who knows what might could happen with us being on the street. Don’t want to end up dead somewhere and no one not know who I be, my family not know where I be.”

In her analysis of the current “tattoo renaissance,” DeMello finds that the some middle class Americans get tattoos to convey the sacredness of their bodies that are eating vegan and are ecologically friendly (DeMello 2000, 169-172). For Latanya, her inscribed name is not expressing care of her body that has a hip lifestyle. Rather, her tattoo safeguards against homeless strangerliness following her body to death. It is an understated way of declaring to the world that she does care about her body. It gives her some assurance in the face of her rightfully anxiety that should she die in homelessness,
she not die a totally anonymous death53 but be known and remembered as Latanya. Her body matters. Latanya does not explicitly bring up God. However, by identifying this tattoo as sacred, I hear Latanya implying that her body matters to God—that bodies, even of those deemed matter out of place are emplaced in the divine.

I discovered that tattoos among these homeless women signified not just beauty and a desire to be known after death, but also a sacredness linked to new life. Judy, an African American woman who has attended the DPC Wednesday worship, recently got a butterfly tattoo “because butterflies are free and I’m free and I’ll never be hurt or married again.” This tattoo seemed to represent her reclaiming her body as her own, not to be abused or trapped in a bad marriage. Judy lost her home when her husband, who had a history of beating her, left her for another woman. After staying at the Mission for almost a year, she has been working a seasonal job at the Titans Arena and just got another at Kroger’s, and is hopeful to soon move into a low-income housing unit. Judy talked about how her tattoo reminded her that Jesus healed and blessed her. She shared one of her favorite parts of scripture, the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:

Jesus is blessing those who’ve been persecuted in his name and those who’ve mourned. I’ve been so down about all my husband did to me, he persecuted me, and this butterfly, it’s a new life from its old cocoon that is going to fly away. Jesus blessed me in that and

53 Tattoos have functioned for identification purposes. More unusual were the numbers of babies and small children tattooed after the Lindbergh kidnapping by parents concerned for their safety. Other examples include concentration camp victims or criminals to classify them as deserving of punishment and shame or, similar to Latanya’s concern, soldiers who want to their dead bodies to be recognized as their own. See DeMello, Bodies Inscribed, 65, 67 and Maxwell-Stewart, “Skin Deep Devotion,” 130.
he’s healed me of that. I’m glad. I’m not sad no more. I’ve come a long way, Jesus made a way out of no way and I’m gonna fly away.

Although not a traditional Christian symbol, Judy’s butterfly tattoo is imbued with spiritual meaning. She understands it to represent her transformation from an old life with a broken marriage that put her in homelessness to a new life of independence as a single woman, trying to put her life back together for herself and her son. Talking about her “coming a long way” and flying away, Judy’s tattoo struck me as closest to a pilgrimage tattoo from the early Christian tradition. It seemed to signify a journey and mark a shift for her into freedom and newness of life in her unmarried status and hopefully in a home.

In conclusion, I found tattoos as embodied spiritual practices to function among the homeless in a variety of ways, many allowing the homeless to feel more fully human and nourishing their agency. While a few homeless linked tattooing to deviance, most homeless with spiritually significant tattoos talked about feeling deeply connected to a remembered event or person represented in it. As permanent art on the skin, they give a feeling of assurance to the homeless that God and significant loved ones are forever with them. Often these were bereavement tattoos expressing attachments to a child and literalizing (so, Connerton) felt-touch experiences of motherhood, as seen in Latanya and Annie. Bereavement tattoos also acted as a sacramental sign or mark of God’s abiding love and the love by a parent, such as with Sandy.

Tattoos sometimes evoked for the homeless favorite bible verses or biblical stories where they saw their lives in scripture or parallel to the narratives. The tattoo was
seen as having some kind of capacity to inspire or transform them for the better, maybe with strength in Christ or strength like Samson (so, Sandy and Billy). It might be looked to as someone prayed for strength to stay drug-free, as Latanya did so she could “stick together” with her daughter, like Naomi and Ruth. Tattoos were ways for the homeless to claim their bodies as sacred, be it beauty for Dominique or Latanya’s insistence that her particular homeless body matters if found dead on the streets. Sometimes the tattoo marked healing, newfound freedom and hope in a future, as with Judy recovering from the end of an abusive marriage and reclaiming her body as sacred. Finally, tattooing as an embodied spiritual practice among the homeless shows some agency: it requires voluntary choice and is a creative act involving some thought by the subject that is personal to his or her own lived experiences. However, tattooing as a faith practice is not unambiguously easy in regard to agency; as Toni shows, anxiety over a tattoo’s potential deviancy compounding her already stigmatized homeless identity can stifle a homeless person’s desire to be close to God through tattoos with religious meaning.

From photographs of sacred spaces, I found that the homeless, in their walking the city, can instill places with their own meaning—often shaped by a poor working class or a homeless habitus, but also stemming from memories, prayer, and scripture—and have opportunities to experience God’s presence. Photos of their sacred spaces showed how God became real for some through creativity, feeling divine protection, receiving empathetic care, and being in the natural world and with animal companions. Some photos revealed an experience of God’s presence through absence, a struggle to make meaning of hard times, and despondency. For some such as Mario blessing his dogs or
Bud praying Psalm 23 in an alley, conversation with God and scripture are important aspects of their sacred space. For others—like Gary walking on Music Row, Coyote being with researchers who care about him, or Toni drawing with children on a sidewalk,—they may not be communicating directly with God as much as they are being aware of their relationship to the divine. Their sacred spaces may be less about gaining direct contact with God and more about where they feel in their activities an awareness of God’s guidance and love. Photos showed spaces could be sacred because of one’s own body, interactions with certain people who help relieve stigma and shame, and a sense that they, indeed, do matter to and can meet the divine in their own creative acts.
Conclusion: Spiritualities of the Displaced

I started this project by identifying some of the features of the “wound” (McClintock Fulkerson 2007) of homelessness and examining social and personal problems that come with being displaced, particularly stigma, or a “spoiled identity” (Goffman 1963), and shame, a possible consequence of stigmatization and a feeling of embodying worthlessness and unlovability (Lewis 1999; Brown 2003). I have worked to show how stigma and shame can be spiritual problems for many homeless who are often keenly aware of being seen as transgressors or matter out of place (Cresswell 2004; Douglas 1966). Stigmatization and shame play out on the interpersonal level with “mixed contact” between the stigmatized and “normals” (Goffman 1963). Many non-homeless are not intentionally callous; they speak of their desire to help the homeless. However, feeling awkward and self-conscious in face-to-face interactions, they may drift into apathy and fall back into practicing obliviousness and busyness of time simply because it is the easier thing to do. (Frankly, this is one fear of mine as I finish this project and will not be around the homeless with regularity.) Often, in “mixed contact,” the homeless are directly shunned or are deprived of attention and rendered invisible in subtle but insidious ways— quickening your pace, clutching tightly to your body and belongings, crossing a street to avoid anticipated contact, locking your car doors, or averting your gaze. Stigmatization, or a state of dis-grace for the homeless, can be perpetuated by such unholy classed and raced habituations. Theologically, they speak to the human condition as preconditions for sin of violence and markers of our idolatrous
anxieties and fears originating in the tragic dimension of our creaturely finitude (McClintock Fulkerson 2010, 239-243). Our anxieties and fears that keep us stuck in particular bodily habits toward the poor stranger and weaken our courage to risk compassion and flexibility are a tragic part of our finite human condition.

In the face of these kinds of degradation and avoidance rituals that can present an assault on the homeless person’s self, the homeless often must work to manage their stigmatized identities and salvage a sense of self-worth (Snow and Anderson 1987, 1993), but complicating this is the homeless habitus of what I heard many call, “watching your back.” Being homeless entails not only learning to negotiate interactions of shameful shunning and obliviousness with the non-homeless but also developing isolating habits of survival. Becoming accustomed to a stressful life of wariness of others and concern for safety on the streets and in shelters can involve a great deal of self-imposed isolation and guarding of what you have in terms of things, privacy, space, selfhood, even sanity. A theological reading of the homeless persons’ habitus will move beyond seeing it as sinful because their isolation is a symptom of their pride “to go it alone” or of their poverty as self-inflicted and due to immorality. Instead we can read their habitus as conditioned by the tragic feature of social sins. The homeless are doing what they know how to do in order to take care of themselves when they feel their very existence is under threat.

Losing one’s place socially, politically, and economically—that is, losing power—is a common feature of homelessness (Wright 2005), and such socio-spatial stigmatization and the loss of place for the homeless can be seen in the place-making of
Nashville. In Chapter 1, I described the history of Nashville’s place-making for progress that has simultaneously been one of displacing those deemed in the way of progress, often the poor. The city’s place-making was unified by attitudes and practices meant to reform or exclude the extreme poor. This eventually led to a “lash up” (Molotch 2000) of the homeless and their places of shelters. I hoped to show in Chapter 1 how the homeless can bear the cost we may try to ignore in a city’s transformation by a downtown revitalization. Forced to comply with those in power, the homeless and their shelters became a kind of “inertia” that simply “rolled through time” as downtown Nashville was invested, disinvested, and then reinvested into a place bringing in business and tourism with its historic charm and ties to its country music past (Molotch 2000; Williams 2010). The exclusionary attitudes and practices in Nashville’s mid to late 20th century place-making were shaped by and part of larger national trends, such as the deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill and historic preservation/gentrification, and they took different forms: the city goals for progress that required demolishing housing and dislocating the extreme poor; waves of suburbanization’s white upper-middle class flight; local authorities criminalizing homelessness through quality of life ordinances; and, the NIMBY pressure from residential and business neighbors as well as churches.

Thus, in this tale of Nashville’s place-making, a significant aspect of this wound of homelessness is the way that the classed and raced habituations of the non-homeless who, consciously or preconsciously, contribute to the displacement of the homeless for fear of sharing their communal space with them. Such unholy bodily knowledge also affects the formative story of Downtown Presbyterian Church that was born out of a
schism due to mid-twentieth century suburban white flight. That a remnant of the
congregation chose to embrace its urban church’s identity, continued worshipping
downtown and saved their urban church from demolition for a parking garage (albeit for
different reasons) allowed DPC, years later, to be a witness to God’s redemption in the
city and provide a faithful place for three homeless social worlds to emerge.

The making of the places of DPC and Nashville have been crucial for
understanding the larger historic and socioeconomic forces and material realities
impacting the day to day lives and spiritual experiences of the homeless I interviewed and
observed. However, neither DPC nor Nashville is the central story here. The real story
belongs to the homeless persons who live out their faith in their participation in the three
social worlds housed at DPC as well as in their transient daily life outside of the church
walls. To that end, in my conclusion, I am setting out to do three tasks. First, I will
compare my findings on how each homeless social world is a site of lived faith.
Essentially, I will be doing a theological reading of the activities and belief-practices of
the homeless according to what I consider redemptive and faithful and gathering
conclusions for what I have seen as life in the Spirit for the displaced. God is not just an
analytical object; I assume an existence of God and I am claiming these redemptive and
faithful behaviors do witness to God’s reality. My normative evaluation of God’s
presence or wisdom found in redemptive forms of spiritualities of the displaced is made
on the basis of nurturing or increasing agency as well as the creation of a space for the
homeless to feel honored as Beloved or created in the image of God.

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Second, with my findings in mind, I will work toward an adequate definition of spirituality. A complicating factor in doing a project on Christian spirituality is that the term has taken on numerous definitions and has suffered from conceptual vagueness and confusion in its modern usage in a variety of places from churches, retreat centers, and seminaries to yoga studios, self-help books, and Oprah. I want to address this vagueness in the popular context of “spiritual but not religious.” This group has been studied in the social sciences, and as I hope to show the concept of spirituality worked out from it is inadequate for my own project, particularly in the way it upholds a false dichotomy between spirituality and religion, one that I did not find among the homeless. I also will consider understandings of the term historically (as a life of contemplative prayer) and as conceptualized by two scholars in the field of Christian spirituality (as beliefs lived out and as liturgy schooling our desires) and point out their limitations. Understandings of spirituality by Rowan Williams and Sandra Schneider provide the most helpful account; from them I will highlight and clarify four features necessary to spirituality in the context of homelessness: practices, agency, trauma, and community. My third task is making a case for spirituality as a feasible analytical concept. Spirituality in sociology has been challenged as to its viability by Matthew Wood who fears sociologists can not adequately describe social contexts of their subjects’ spiritual experiences when they see the spiritual as individual phenomena. However, Marla Frederick’s Between Sundays uses spirituality to analyze the belief-practices of African American women in the very ways Wood wants. Since my project is one of practical theology, I will end by considering
spirituality’s relationship to practical theology where spirituality can be a useful concept for inquiries into the lives of faith of persons.

*Who is the Real Evangelist? A Theological Reading of the Homeless Social Worlds*

“So, who is the real Evangelist?” asked my friend who listened to me share some of my findings from this project. Good question. Who is the bearer of Good News? Is it the homeless or the non-homeless participating in a support group for the displaced? A street paper staff giving the homeless an alternative to panhandling and a possible way out of homelessness, the vendors themselves, or the persons supporting them and buying their paper? A pastor preaching to and praying with the transient each week? Or, perhaps the audience receiving his proclamation? All of the homeless who provided testimonies of their different knowledges? In a way, these all can be answered in the affirmative.

My own theological norms for evaluating how faithfully the Wednesday worship, the Living Room, and *The Contributor* vendors on the city’s street corners are bearing Good News and God’s redemption is based on where I see a nurturing of the homeless’ agency. Let me clarify what I mean by agency. Agency can refer to engaging politics for large change, but by such an understanding, my normative claim would only find redemptive a spirituality that disrupted the socio-economic and political structures contributing to homelessness (Stivers 2011, 3-6). While disrupting and eliminating oppressive structures is crucial, agency need not always be limited to engaging in direct protest of institutional impediments to justice in the public sphere (Frederick 2003, 7). This runs the risk of obscuring the ways persons can engage in creative agency in less
public places. By agency, I mean “everyday forms of resistance,” or those smaller acts where people can show they disagree with the status quo (Frederick 2003, 7) or acts where they can find strength in God to continue enduring until some real large-scale change may happen for them. They can show that they perceive themselves as mattering in the world and to the divine in their activities and practices (Elliott et al 2004). Just being able to choose to participate in any or all of these homeless social worlds at DPC shows this kind of agency. This is what I have in mind here when evaluating how well activities in these social worlds give the homeless a sense of creatively acting to emplace themselves even in their dire circumstances.

My own theological norms for evaluating redemptive spiritualities among the homeless are also based on where I see the homeless feel Beloved and fully human as created in God’s image. An enhanced capacity and freedom to care for another is part of what it means to be *Imago Dei*. DPC’s pastor emeritus, Rev. McGeachy had remarked that his ecclesial vision of homeless and non-homeless was influenced by Nouwen’s *Life of the Beloved*. Nouwen explains that being the Beloved is the beginning and end of the Christian spiritual life. Moreover, says Nouwen, Belovedness is a fundamental truth of the human condition; it is our birthright that humans yearn to claim and deserve to be able to claim. The “greatest enemy” of life in the Spirit is being unable to claim this birthright because of self-rejection and rejection by others as it deafens the Sacred’s calling us ‘Beloved’ (28). Such rejection, for many homeless, comes in the forms of stigmatization and shame that diminishes their personal, interpersonal, and socio-spatial spheres of living. It reduces opportunities for them to feel like they matter enough to be
seen with dignity (Elliott et al 2004; Partis 2003). Thus, both norms of Belovedness and agency are significant in light of the spiritual problems of stigma and shame and the homeless perceiving themselves to matter.

Overall, I found that the Living Room encourages a homeless person’s agency in everyday acts of personal resistance to being treated as matter out of place, and often the homeless saw this agency as a distinctive trait of spirituality. As I discussed in Chapter 3, I observed the Living Room to be held together across time by a group of practices and activities that both different participants and I identified as “spiritual,” and that I also understand as forming participants to be more fully human. In fact, some choose to come so they could be more than “takers” of charity, as they feel when they attend church. Here, they could offer something to the group, and getting to act helps them feel fully accepted as Beloved. These persons do not see this spiritual group replacing church worship, but the group gives them a place where they can be attended to and treated with dignity that they do not find in churches (Elliott et al, 2004; Partis 2003).

One agentive act that emplaces them as Beloved and bears God’s redemption is lament. In lament, or what some homeless called “being real” and “giving it all up to God,” they can express not just the good but the bad in their lives, something Wuthnow finds lacking in many support groups which do not see how struggle or hardship is connected to the Sacred. Complaining about your “hunger” in order “to get fed” is seen by them as a spiritual thing authorized by God. For a population disenfranchised in many ways including grief, lamenting can be a good. Through it, the homeless do not lose their sense of “righteous discontent” (Frederick 2003, 65). Even if the crying out is not
leading to a direct confrontation with the powers that be, they get to acknowledge that there are social injustices and ask aloud why they must continue to suffer with things as they are. Lamenting can be a transformative and divinely graced act in helping homeless break through to a more hopeful place or, if they remained in complaint, they realized they were not alone as others joined them, sometimes even singing to God, “How long?”

God’s grace is also found in the activity of storytelling and empathetic listening as well as the closing ritual of summarizing what persons had shared, where homeless persons said they felt like they had a voice. When homeless persons practice empathetic listening to storytellers, they can see the difference it makes for the speaker to receive empathy. In being reminded of times they, too, “had fallen through the cracks,” as one of them put it, they can do “scenario thinking” (Sample 1994 39) and express empathy for others who, in that moment, were more unfortunate than themselves. If mattering—the perception that you have a meaningful place in the world—involves being able to provide resources (Elliott et al 2004), then empathetic support and sharing advice gleaned from living on the streets give the homeless a sense that their presence and contribution mattered. They discover that they do have something to give in this “folk healing” (Sample 1994, 23). Compassionate listening could even become a point of transformation for some, as it was with Anita, who in realizing that she made a difference in providing support, was drawn out of her addiction and found some motivation for getting sober. Empathetic support could inspire personal transformation and further agency in other ways, such as when the homeless set boundaries for themselves, be it a
woman saying no to an abusive relationship or a man refusing to be manipulated any longer by “friends” who repeatedly stole his things and kicked him out of his own home.

Moreover, the ability to receive empathy also could be a creative agentive act in risking openness to connecting with others. Sleeping may seem like a stretch for being considered a creative act revealing God’s grace, but I wonder if it is possible that when someone like Jason comes to the Living Room to sleep, is it an expression of risking to trust in people who relate to his plight of “roughing it” and an expression of receiving their support? The act of receiving empathy also has the potential to move someone from shame because in receiving it, someone, like Sandy, could recognize that whatever experiences she assumed exposed herself as inadequate or unworthy (losing her children to the foster system, getting a felony, etc…), she could instead be understood by others in a non-judgmental way (Brown 2007). If shame entails a feeling of being unworthy of connection (Brown 2007), then for the homeless experiencing shame as a consequence of managing a stigmatized identity, their receiving empathetic care can counter such shame. Of course, this is not to say that life in the Spirit in the Living Room completely altered shame issues. Coyote deemed it a sacred space for the people who showed him God in the empathetic listening and made him feel Beloved, yet he still felt like his image of God was marred by his homelessness and mental illness. His juggling of these two conflicting faith identities shows that the Living Room could only do so much in its redemptive alteration of some of their stigmas.

In hope-generating activities such as celebrating joys, the Living Room offers the homeless a place to act by sharing their thanks for God’s work in their lives. As the
homeless shared the good of what they felt grateful for—the Living Room support group itself, “a way out of no way,” one of their own getting housing or work, staying sober, reconnecting with family, honoring someone’s birthday—their gratitude could engender hope. Like giving empathy, feeling grateful for what you have lets you know you have something left to give and so matter (Frederick 2003, 214; Elliott et al 2004). Sometimes in their acts of celebration, they made unrealistic promises, which shows the tragic dimension of the social sins limiting their agency. Occasionally, the homeless did not act with gratitude but despair at waiting for their own needs to be met. Augustine’s declaration to the group leader John that waiting, or submitting to God’s will and plan, did not pay his bills, revealed the fragility of the Living Room’s redemptive “folk healing.” Still, when the homeless recognized what they did have in resources or saw it in others, this could, as Reggie said to Kim with her news about Good Will job training, “put a good feeling in [him],” and so produce the good of “keeping on.”

Through these various activities, the homeless and group leaders in the Living Room can and are actively helping to create a community, or a “new creation,” as Don, a co-founder, had first envisioned this group. The formerly homeless group leaders Madge and John play a special role in fostering this community and demonstrate their agency by helping to nurture it—and the agency of those in it—week after week. Frederick’s description of some of the African American women who care for neighbors in need is an apt one for Madge and John: they “exude a type of energy that reflects their spiritual vitality” as they enthusiastically cheer on the homeless and give of themselves to offer a refuge to the poor (214). Both understand this as their ministry and as their way of
combatting oppressive forces against the poor in the city. They may not be directly confronting those oppressive powers in a public way, but over time, in these weekly meetings their being with the homeless in their struggles has helped to create a place where the homeless can “ignite their fighting spirits,” as Karl the co-founder of the Living Room had so wanted, and connect with others to better their lives.

The Living Room certainly creates a space for the homeless to feel they matter as humans and are Beloved through its activities. Homeless persons may not have used the theological terms “Beloved” or “image of God,” but in other ways they expressed feeling emplaced by God in the support group. Often a sense of being Beloved comes out in how the homeless talk about God or their relationship to God. More than once as persons started to share, they first exclaimed their names and pronounced emphatically, “I am a child of God!” or “The Lord is my shepherd!” or “I may be homeless but God knows I am still human.” They lament and hope here because they understand that God cares about the lives of the displaced. Jason, who regularly slept in meetings, illustrates the homeless’ knowledge of God’s love for them. Jason believes God understands he is sleep deprived and wants him to rest—in other words, God cares for his well-being and wants him to be accorded the respect of being able to engage in an activity all humans (and creatures) require. Also, consider John who tells the group that their hugging him, offering him a smile, and holding his hand in the prayer at the end all make him feel and know God’s love. These embodied gestures—touching in a friendly embrace and in the prayer circle and a direct look of affirmation and joy to see him—show a redemptive change in the bodily habituations and face-to-face interactions between the homeless and
non-homeless and in it reveal God’s wisdom. Such changes for some homeless do not come easily and quickly. It took months before Chastity, a white woman in her forties suffering from mental illness, felt safe enough to hold hands in the circle; at first she put her hand against the wall, and so would the other two persons on either side of her as a way to show that she matters to the group, they want her to be a part of the group and they would meet her where she was and show their connection to her in the way she needed. Small changes in bodily responses like these allow the homeless to feel more image-of-God dignity. They do not always carry over outside of the Living Room, but they certainly are nurtured and happening here.

The Wednesday worship service, more than the other two homeless social worlds, struck me as most ambiguous in its redemptive life in the Spirit. If preaching is not just about hearing and receiving the good news but then enabling persons to be good news (Smith 1992, 6), what good news is the Wednesday worship service enabling the homeless to be? In some small but not insignificant ways, the agency and sense of Belovedness of homeless persons at the Wednesday worship service is nourished. For many, this starts with why they choose to attend since all are already coming to be fed lunch; Larry for whom worship is a way to express gratitude and give back to the church that is feeding him as opposed to his simply being dependent on their charity. Unlike the Living Room participants, none of the homeless at Wednesday worship explicitly named their reasons for coming and the act of coming as “spiritual” although they did describe the chapel space as such. Some come into “the Lord’s house” to express gratitude and give back to the church that is feeding them as opposed to their simply being dependent
on the church’s charity. Many come intentionally seeking out peaceful respite from life’s different hardships, including waiting in line that a few perceive as demeaning and marking them as Other to the non-homeless working downtown. Someone, like Strider, who has been institutionalized, finds the worship space freeing and uses the quiet setting with the Word in his struggle with anger. Others, like Annie, can experience peace away from the chaos and sexual violence of her camp. Even if briefly, it seems that the service can provide relief to their suffering. Whatever the struggle in their homelessness, their acts of coming to worship—be it for a quiet beautiful space in God’s house, the chance to sit still in some serenity indoors, or the opportunity to be strengthened by the Word—produces a good of fortitude. Worship time and space helps quell their anxieties and gives them strength from God “to keep on,” a creative act in its own right that implies they matter enough to persist for something better. Proclamation and space together enable the homeless to live this good news in these ordinary creative acts that let them feel like they have a place in God’s home.

Worshippers also show agency in how they interpret the sermons, so even when the preacher may intend one message to be heard, the homeless may walk away with the message they need to hear for preserving a sense of dignity. For instance, if instead of hearing he is responsible for bringing “nobodies” into their midst, Larry hears that he is the one in the middle of the circle getting stoned, this could potentially leave Larry feeling powerless. However, Larry makes meaning from this sermon so that he feels assured of God wanting something more for him and he is justified in feeling indignant when treated as a transgressor around the public library.
A few feel enabled by the proclamation of Good News to be disciples of Jesus. The pastor Ken Locke has said he intends to impart a loving message that they are Children of God and disciples capable of and held to the same moral standards as his non-homeless congregation. As Ken put it, he wants them to know it is not about the number of bibles that they own that make for a good Christian, but how they live in a just and loving way. For some like Kenny Bill, James, and Chris, his injunctions of self-responsibility and caring for others in more need than one’s self is taken as good news. They hear in it a “real” Gospel message that focuses on Jesus’s teachings, unlike the Mission where they hear a message that departs from the Gospel by giving them chapel speakers who preach about their own “lost then found” narratives of drug addiction or warn the homeless of their being trapped in moral crises of poverty. Receiving a word at DPC that stays close to the biblical text and talks about discipleship makes them feel like they are being taken seriously as faithful Christians rather than being stereotyped as homeless drunks and drug addicts or being cast as sinners whose souls need saving. To have such a word countered at DPC on Wednesdays is, indeed, good news and enables some homeless to see that they matter both in the sense that a pastor is aware of them as more than sinful souls and that a pastor sees them as “normal”—as capable of responsible for personal actions and so shown some trust. The homeless sitting quietly during the service does not necessarily have to be construed as passivity since several clearly are using worship to actively hold themselves together—to salvage the self (Snow and Anderson 1993) and attend to their inner lives whether it is letting go of anxieties,
thinking about how they will meet their needs, or listening to a sermon in a way that speaks to where they are.

However, while the pastor has also said he intends to impart a loving message that they are Children of God, this message may not be enough to enable the homeless to live justly and lovingly and keep the homeless habitus they have had to develop to survive the streets. For many of them, indeed, it is in part about how many bibles you own. Some, like Larry, holds onto bibles given to them by different church groups because they are a small indication that they are remembered and noticed by someone. Many others hold onto bibles because they are seen as a source of God’s power to protect them from “evil-doers” who may see the bible and think twice about hurting them. In the face of the pastor’s “You are responsible for your actions and others less fortunate than you” message, some like Bud do not feel empowered to do this because they know that to survive homelessness, they need to practice a distrust and hyper-vigilance. Someone like Bud works through this dissonance between the good news he hears preached and what he knows to be true in his daily experiences and believes that if Jesus really cares about him, Jesus will understand that he cannot follow such injunctions if he is to survive. My reading might be judged as incorrect here, but I wonder if Bud’s own interpretation of the sermons is redemptive insofar as it shows his agency and his self-perception that he matters enough to deserve self-care. On the surface, Bud’s belief-practices could be critiqued for lacking a risk of adventure and “resurrection imagination,” but the brokenness is not located not so much in his response to the sermon and his homeless habitus as it is in the expectation of the preacher—and not just his individually but one
that is a larger social expectation—not taking seriously enough the need for other social and systemic wrongs to be healed first so that Bud can feel safe to respond and not need to “watch his back.”

Others, like Phyllis and James, feel welcomed as Children of God, but I find that this is undercut by the spatial and temporal control measures with the door guard and the waiting meant to create docile bodies since the homeless are perceived more as transgressors of the Body of Christ rather than full members of it. The poor strangers are allowed entrance to be cared for, as Jesus and God commanded, but they are viewed with wariness and as incapable of following normative rules of behavior. Although the homeless do not identify DPC’s disciplinary dimensions of the waiting lines, the door guard’s presence, and homiletic injunctions to be a disciple in the line as shaming, I see that they have the potential to diminish a homeless person’s sense of Belovedness as life in the Spirit happens in the service. If the sermons are meant to treat them as “normal” non-homeless Christians, do these disciplinary actions? The line and door guard, to me, sadly speak to a broken reality where the church finds it must use disciplinary means that can exacerbate stigmatization and the feeling Troy has of “not counting”—a feeling of not having the power to enter a church for worship on your own terms or being trusted to act with civility rather than to have civility “taught” in this way. The doorman Herb understands himself to be enacting the Gospel in his role of allowing ingress and egress at DPC. However, if, as McClintock Fulkerson has pointed out, being in relation to God as humans is being “bodily responder[s],” then Herb’s own bodily habituation of distrust toward the homeless other does not seem redemptively transformed in his weekly
practice of guarding the church door and ordering lines (250). They are not seen as mattering in the sense of being able to be relied upon, and in the distrust and fear of them, their agency is constrained.

Some shared that they wanted to be more actively involved in the service, but the lack of liturgy suggests more concern about fearing potential chaos and so creating obedient bodies rather than providing opportunities for the homeless “to get up there” and “relate to one another” as Bud suggests. This, along with the line and door guard in front of locked doors and the mistaken shaming of innocent participants like Kim with her journaling reveals how worship can exacerbate the homeless feeling like they are transgressors in the Body of Christ. Wednesday worship may reveal to the homeless a welcoming, loving God of refuge or it may reveal a more exclusionary God authorizing discipline and shame. To do the latter, as may have happened with Kim, is not redemptive life in the Spirit.

Certainly, when there is an absence of non-homeless persons at this service, life in the Spirit is diminished in its possibilities of redeeming unholy bodily knowledges and face-to-face interactions. While a few homeless were curious to bring the non-homeless among them, many more hesitated and were unwilling to give up the safety found in the ownership of their worship space. Then again, even that safety is complicated: though the homeless own this space, absent from worship is the element of gathering and a real sense of community (Saunders 2006, 29) due to the homeless habitus of “watch your back” and the disciplinary structures in place. In the end, when I see brokenness in this homeless social world, I want to follow McClintock Fulkerson’s naming of sin and be
careful not to simplistically attribute it to any one person—the pastor, the door guard, the homeless person who does not want to worship with the non-homeless or be a disciple in community in ways that we normally think of community; I think that these traces of ambiguity here are due more to sinful social inheritances of anxiety about the homeless other and sinful socioeconomic conditions creating a fearful homeless habitus for survival (242). These are what undermine the homeless from being seen as fully Beloved and part of Christ’s body.

And, what of life in the Spirit for The Contributor vendors? More so than the Living Room participants and the Wednesday worship attendants, the vendors’ agency at work is making an unlikely way for them to get out of homelessness and takes them into the public’s eye. When I saw their agentive acts as distinctively spiritual, none of them explicitly used that word. Some creatively act by treating their mapped areas as a “worship spot” when they can experience God’s presence through nature, singing, talking to God while touching a cross given by a customer, or listening for particular sounds that remind a vendor of a lost loved one and the divine—all of these activities are generated by the vendors and help them, even in a life full of loss, to feel connected to God and emplaced. More than anything though, the street paper gives them the opportunity to act out their right to be seen by Nashvillians as more than panhandlers and transgressors of the city’s “prime spaces” (Snow and Anderson 1993). Their work shows they can provide a contribution to society through their selling a paper’s needed perspective on poverty. Their work lets them perceive themselves as legitimate microbusiness persons and in their work, some say they begin to feel “normal.” In particular their actions speak
out against recent increased bans on aggressive panhandling and “quality of life” ordinances that show how stigmas attached to the extreme poor can get codified into law. Many take pride in their work because they see themselves as needed to educate the non-homeless on issues of homelessness and so gain a sense that they matter (Elliott et al 2004).

In feeling called to this work, be it through the writing, the selling, or the interactions with particular persons, the homeless experience God seeing them as “somebodies” and wants others too as well. Having a special purpose in vending can give them a positive sense of self through faith and mentally counter some stigma and shame. Some, like Anita and Chris, creatively act when they feel commissioned to write articles or poetry that they hope will undo the silences of injustices about extreme poverty and make life better for them. However, I have recently seen how a vendor’s sense of calling can bring problems when it shifts and she desires a higher position in the street paper but lacks the education and job skills. As vendors feel empowered by their work and begin to seek higher paying work opportunities within the street paper, the non-homeless staff must navigate sharing and practicing “a liberating power consistent with the Gospel” (Gathje 2011, 211), an issue that illustrates some of the ambiguity as redemptive relationships across various lines form.

As Mario aptly said, the customers buy the paper not so much because of the content but because of the person in front of them. Thus, I see how their agentive “contributing” is redemptive because it involves their embodied presence that in divinely graced encounters of “mixed contact” can reverse the invisibilities and stigmas attached
to homelessness. Many feel they personally matter in their being recognized by the customers who grow familiar with them, remember their names, inquire about their lives, and even help them in material ways or bring them gifts on occasions of baptisms or birthdays. Of course, the redemption revealing God here is fragile: not all vendors gain positive attention; one, Lisa, feels ashamed from the exposure of standing out in the midst of the non-homeless world for all to see. Some, like Billy, report feeling God’s presence in positive interactions but also have experienced negative attention in taunts like “Get a real job,” or from the “nonperson treatment” (Goffman 1963; Lankenau 1999a, 1999b) that they are working to counter. For some, like Richard, it is a divinely graced opportunity to feel like he matters as a “normal” working person, and to redemptively transform his interactions with the non-homeless in which he now experience others responding to his body in a way that is respectful.

Like Richard, I see this kind of work as street preaching. He and other vendors are embodied sign-acts that both call the non-homeless to re-member the homeless with changed interactions and provide hope for altered relations where we experience God’s presence and for altered socioeconomic conditions for the extreme poor. Sometimes vendors, like Billy with his Abrahamic “be a blessing” apron, use a prop in their sign act, and this shows some creative agency as they individually figure out how to take action with problematic customers or low sales when they feel invisible. Vendors may not be literally naked like some in the early Christian tradition of street preachers, but they expose themselves in all their vulnerabilities and losses to a city in an effort to show that they do matter to God—as Sandy said to me, “I am Christ’s and they can see that
instead.” Still, ambiguity appears in here in what I see as silences about residual racism and an unspoken fear that someone like Richard may not feel totally trusted into “normal” his community of white customers and neighboring merchants as a black man. Thus, while the street paper creates opportunities for God’s grace as customers and vendors practice connection and flexibility that can re-member the homeless, raced habituations is still in need of healing.¹

For my theological reading of life in the Spirit in each of these places, I think Wendy Farley’s incarnational practice of facial vision is helpful for understanding what can loosen our bondage to bodily habituations of fear of the homeless stranger and so help us be more faithful “bodily responders” to God.² I mention her work here because I think that facial vision can be found in redemptively transformed interactions in the Living Room and The Contributor as well as the larger tales of place-making in Nashville and at DPC. Farley says Jesus was able to be with the poor because “for Jesus, the poor were persons who mattered. He saw them. They came into focus for him” (194). What made Jesus’s being with the poor more than “a social program” was his “ethic of optics” that allowed him to see full persons (194). Rather than a stigma, he saw “society’s throwaways” as persons “to cherish, enjoy, and befriend” (194). Jesus could see that the sufferer existed; he made room for them to have a place and matter.

¹ Mount Shoop and McClintock identify these practices in their recent work on white color blindness in churches. See Marcia Mount Shoop and Mary McClintock Fulkerson, “Transforming Memory: Re-membering the Eucharist,” Theology Today 70, no. 2 (July 2013): 157-158.
As Farley works out a theology of incarnation and argues for it as the basis for inclusivity in the church, she discusses the practice of “facial vision” (180-184). Facial vision is the practice of contemplating Christ—the incarnation revealing our shared humanity and vulnerabilities—in every face. Drawing on Nicholas of Cusa’s icon theology, Farley describes how compassion begins with facial vision in praying with icons: “the loving gaze of Christ’s face becomes indistinguishable from our own face and from every other face. Compassion flows through each face; we are Christ for one another, giving and receiving tender mercies of Christ” (189). She then goes on to delineate what she means by the practice of facial vision as “a way of describing the radical interconnection of all things. When we recognize that we share a common humanity and a common divine suffering, anywhere becomes our own suffering” and “we are compelled to cherish the Christ-face of every being” (183). She suggests that the presence of Christ in human faces is both metaphysical (a deep human truth about our nature) and a practice whereby we seek the “‘face of faces’ that breaks up the attachment of the ego” and frees us for truer vision found in the way Jesus could see the poor (183).

Facial vision across the differences I think, can contest everyday bodily practices that create the invisibility and dis-grace of homelessness. I fear I run the risk here of presenting this as happening with ease and simplicity—all we need to do is wake up and look at someone with compassion and all inherited social anxieties and fears of the homeless other will vanish. I think the failure of the Wednesday worship to desegregate, of some Nashvillians (like the suburb of Brentwood) to welcome the Contributor vendors as legitimate workers, and of the city’s downtown history where neighborhoods played
“hot potato” with the homeless shelters definitely shows otherwise. The capacity for compassionate seeing is contingent upon the non-homeless person’s ability to recognize the other as human and to be able to move beyond habituations that show the precondition to sin; to not fall into callousness or apathy; and, to not let themselves be deceived by stigmas that they take as the essential truth of the homeless person.

Practicing facial vision is, I think, what Father Strobel meant when he said he was moved to start A Room in the Inn during Nashville’s spike in homelessness because the homeless persons are icons of Jesus Christ; it is what Rev. Pat McGeachy was hoping for but could not achieve in the Wednesday worship; it is what Don saw in Karl to form the Living Room; and what Tom, Tasha, and Andrew saw in the homeless to then motivate them to start The Contributor. Some may judge me for romanticizing, but I think facial vision is what happens on most days in the Living Room meetings, in redemptive interactions between Contributor vendors and customers, and even in the large pictures and stories of vendors the paper runs regularly now on its back cover, as a way to encourage the non-homeless to see them as persons. When harmful practices are redemptively altered not only for the non-homeless but also for the homeless who feel like they matter, we can see God’s wisdom at work. Being able to appear to another as Christ and seeing another as Christ across the differences of extreme poverty---this is God’s grace I see contesting their state of disgrace. Divinely graced encounters where we practice facial vision and open postures across differences is not a practice with, as McClintock Fulkerson puts it, the “traditional Christian markers” but it is one that “may well be an exemplary displays of the telos of a community” (50). For the Living Room,
it displays the group’s commitment to the end good that as its founders Don and Karl wanted, the homeless would have a place to matter as fully human by non-homeless and that the listening and sharing. For the *Contributor* vendors, it displays their commitment to a more disruptive and large-scale end good that not just a group but an entire city recognize homeless vendors as they emplace themselves on the streets as legitimate workers to matter—both in their embodied presence and in the papers’ news.

I will attempt to sum up what I see as life in the Spirit in each place, although I am well aware of the diversities of views from each homeless person participating in them. I see life in the Spirit at the Living Room as one of a fragile and flexible community gathering to become more fully human as they re-member the out-of-place homeless through facial vision, listening, lamenting, and waiting together in expectation. Through the work of *Contributor* vendors, the Spirit can breathe new life into the bodily habituations of both homeless and non-homeless. Life in the Spirit can be prophetically proclaimed in the paper and the vulnerable homeless bodies challenging the non-homeless to see and treat the homeless as fully human. Life in the Spirit at Wednesday worship for the homeless can be one seeking comfort and peace in the refuge of God’s dwelling and proclamation, and it can be one of empowerment to Christian discipleship. It can also be one forming obedience and submission to a church offering charity, and it can be one of isolation.

Gathering up all of their voices and stories from interviews and observations, here is what I can say about the spiritual lives of the homeless. Spirituality for the homeless essentially is about where they perceive God at work in their lives or wait for God’s work
in their lives as they hope in the good of God’s greater plan. One of the astonishing things I learned was how many of them believe that God is truly interested in the outcome of their lives. “God is there for you,” and “God looks out for me,” I heard often. Every person I interviewed thought God really cared about what happened to him or her. The divine is predominantly one of strength and power who watches over the homeless. I heard repeatedly that God is “my shepherd,” “my mighty hand,” and “my rock,” “my daddy giving manna.” Even in their theodicies, they usually concluded that God will provide. Their spirituality, as you can see from these images of God, is grounded in scripture, whether they read the bible themselves or know it from preaching, a family’s teaching, or hymn singing.

For the homeless, faith is not merely another cultural resource or a coping mechanism (Sullivan 2013), but is foundational to their identities and holding their lives together. It is where they turn to make meaning of and find purpose even in their hard times. This is not to say their lives consist only of hard times; God is the author of ordinary joys found in companion animals, a nap, natural beauty, children, music, opportunities for work, and care from empathetic persons. However, hard times were central to a homeless spirituality. Being a victim of rape or incest, losing a loved one, suicidal thoughts, being shot, being incarcerated, being addicted to substances, the list goes on. Some called their struggles “spiritual.” They may not have always felt like God was in the hard time with them, but they drew closer to God from them. The homeless drew on their faith to interpret their hard times as a test, a part of God’s plan, a lesson for personal growth, a lesson in gratitude, and a way to bring them closer to God: “If we
didn’t go through hard times, we wouldn’t develop the relationship we have with God,” said Anita, “Hard times, God. Going through something, more God. It ease up, knowing he delivered me from that hardship. Still God.” I have referred many times to the work the homeless do to “salvage the self” and manage their stigmatized identities, but for the homeless, God is really the great Salvager of their selves. “God won’t let nobody break my spirit, can’t nobody,” as John said. Being “spiritual” meant for many, not giving up.

Finally, a homeless spirituality is often isolated and not always by choice. In their isolation from church congregational life and as they say, most any community, it can be hard for them to find others to, as one put it, “share themselves meaningfully with me so I can stay sane.” Of those who say they have found a church, even then they can still be isolated by their own choosing due to a residue of their homeless habitus: there is Sharon who now has a home and regularly goes to First Baptist downtown which she says has kind people but prefers not to sit with or talk to congregants because, as she says, “I’ve just become less of a people person from all of this. I’ve learned to keep to myself. I’m there to praise God and that’s it.” Some of my subjects like Robin said that they wanted a church but had no means of transportation or time off from a part-time job to attend Sunday worship, thus implying a disparity in resources is at work here (Sullivan 2013). Some like Danny said they “don’t feel like a person” with their extreme poverty and fear being ostracized. Others like Gary and Billy distrust “church hypocrites” and they understand their lack of church involvement as an assertion of independence from a church that they see as against who they are in their poverty (Sample 41, 83). Kenny Bill’s “church” may become feeding the ducks at the river and Mario’s walking the dogs.
at a park, activities they call spiritual, not to denounce church as a bad hierarchal institution but because they simply feel dis-membered from Body of Christ.

Working to a Definition of Spirituality

I want to now turn to the task of conceptualizing spirituality. I will consider definitions of it that pose some limitations, first in sociology and then in the field of Christian spirituality. One prevalent understanding of spirituality, thanks largely to the popularized “spiritual but not religious” phrase, is a conception of it over and against religion that some sociologists, theologians, and religious scholars have tried to debunk. Wade Clark Roof’s work—and then Robert Wuthnow’s early work—helped to canonize a false dichotomy between spirituality and religion. According to Roof, spirituality is associated with authenticity and a seeking of personal growth, often involving some kind of “flow” or peak experience, while religion is associated with participation in an established institution and its patterns of worship and adherence to its tradition’s rules and authority figures. Taking his definition from his study of baby boomers in A Generation of Seekers and their descriptions, Roof defines spirituality as the following: “spirituality gives expression to the being that is in us. It has to do with feelings, with the power that comes from within, with knowing our deepest selves and what is sacred in

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us.” He calls this a “seeker spirituality” that is characterized by a deep involvement in one’s “quest” for both “spiritual support” and “broadened horizons” of different religious beliefs, symbols, and practices.

I want to note a few things here in Roof’s understanding of seeker spirituality that Wuthnow also has used. First, Roof’s definition obviously emphasizes seeking or questing. The spiritual seeker has its own tradition within American religious history. Christian scripture and tradition also shows the notion of the life of faith as a journey of growth toward and with God and the faithful as a pilgrim traveler or wanderer seeking out God. His seeker account of spirituality emphasizes self-definition and experiencing the self as a source of meaning and sacredness, which is not necessarily a problem. However, in Roof’s definition, the journey or seeking ends “within” in the person’s “deepest self” with no reference to the divine. One recent study can help me make my point about why this ending with the individual is problematic. Social scientists Peter Hill et al. found that in this context of “spiritual but not religious,” the term spirituality often substitutes for an individual’s personal feelings about something—“‘fulfilling’ or ‘moving’ or ‘important,’ or ‘worthwhile’”—and they ask in light of such connotations, is

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5 Roof, *A Generation of Seekers*, 64.
7 The 17th century British term ‘seeker’ was popularized by Quaker Rufus Jones who used it to pioneer the liberal transformation of the Society of Friends. He took ‘seeker’ out of a context referring to apocalyptic sectarians and used it to represent the mystical searching trope for the modern spiritual quest. See Schmidt, *Restless Souls*, 236-8.
the term ‘spirituality’ in danger of losing a sense of and response to the Sacred. They rightly make the point that personal positive feelings about something do not make for a spirituality but an ideology or lifestyle.

Roof’s sociological account of being spiritual as seeker is also problematic because it is distorted by its emphasis on inwardness that leaves no room for how the spiritual life is also communal and has a social context. This is not to diminish the importance of the interior life. Personal psychological well-being is significant to a person’s spiritual life, as I have tried to show with homeless who struggle with stigma and shame. Writers on the Christian spiritual life such as Parker Palmer and Henri Nouwen appropriately have emphasized personal psychological wholeness by addressing topics such as depression, loneliness and anxiety and how spiritual disciplines can bring healing to these psychological wounds. Some feminist theologians have pointed out in their attention to issues of power and justice that attending to the interior dimension is important for a person developing inner resources to cope with life’s stresses, to recognize our own brokenness and capacity to wound others, and to practice a Christian vocation of incarnational love. However, Roof’s definition seems skewed toward individualism and does not consider social dimensions that I hoped I have shown must be addressed in the spirituality of a displaced person.

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9 Ibid.
During the 1990’s, Roof’s sociological study and others overly privileged the “spiritual but not religious,” a tendency that cemented not only the false dichotomy between spirituality and religion but also the false impression that the “spiritual but not religious” represent the majority of Americans in their beliefs.¹¹ In Mark Chaves’ recent study of religious trends in American society, he notes an increase particularly among nonreligious young people claiming to be “spiritual but not religious” is the best indicator of the rise in “diffuse spirituality” among Americans, however, even with the notable rise, it is still a small group.¹² Some context for this shift has been provided by Courtney Bender in her fascinating ethnographic study of this population in Cambridge, MA.¹³ Because this group lacks specificity and focus in what they mean by “spiritual,” Chaves argues this impulse will not be able to take shape in a social or political institution.

According to Chaves, this trend is best understood in the context of American society’s

¹³ Bender shows how despite the “spiritual but not religious” people insisting on having individualized spiritual experiences, they indeed learned to be spiritual from others and learned to say that their spirituality was privatized through particular social settings. Courtney Bender, The New Metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 2010), 45-47, 183-186. For historical context on the “spiritual but not religious,” see Catherine Albanese, “Introduction,” American Spiritualities: A Reader ed. Catherine Albanese (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 1-19 and Leigh Schmidt, Restless Souls. Schmidt locates the origin of the “spiritual not religious” phenomenon in late 19th century American religious liberalism. Specifically, he traces it to Transcendentalists and Quakers who thought religion needed saving by reconfiguring it as spirituality that is an individualistic and anti-institutional search. Unlike Schmidt, Albanese focuses on the watershed time of the mid 20th century and starts with Roman Catholicism. She gives an account of the “spiritual but not religious” that shows the rise of spirituality was grounded in religion, and the turn to the spiritual at first was a turn to religion in Christianity’s devotional and contemplative aspects that started with Merton’s Seven Story Mountain.
increasing wariness of institutions, including religious ones, and an overall distancing from traditional religion.

The category “spiritual but not religious” is needed to reflect this reality in American society, but recent sociological studies indicate that even as it has grown, it still is a small subsector and this dichotomy is not held by most Americans. One of Wuthnow’s more recent books, *All in Sync: How Music and Art are Revitalizing American Religion* (2003) admits to his former bias to focus on the “spiritual but not religious” group. In *All in Sync*, he hypothesizes against his original assertion of this spiritual-religious dichotomy and argues that most of the public’s interest in spirituality is finding expression in organized religious institutions. Wuthnow suggests, “To be sure, the quest to know God may arrive from existential yearnings, from illness and loneliness, or from those moments of wonder about the ultimate mysteries of life. But these vague yearnings and experiences have to take shape. They have to find carriers, vehicles of expression to help people make sense of their feelings.”14 Context for Wuthnow’s hypothesis is illustrated in Diana Butler Bass’ study of mainline Protestant congregations that she says are such “carriers” and are “religious and spiritual’ churches” who “reknit old religions with a lively sense of God’s presence as experienced in spiritual practices in community.”15 Most studies on this have shown that Americans see the two as different but interdependent concepts: religion is an “organized spirituality” or an organized

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expression of spirituality that they understand as the individual’s connection to the
divine.  

Thus, far from being in competition, spirituality is perceived by the larger public as
working with organized religion, something scholars of spirituality have already been
asserting in their work. Christian spirituality scholar Stephanie Paulsell calls the division
“pernicious” because it sets up false oppositions of heart or head, practice or theory, and
good or bad, and she calls on scholars to resist them by offering work on spirituality at
the intersections of feeling and thought and theory and practice. Like Paulsell,
American religious scholar Robert Orsi critiques an understanding of spirituality as

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16 For further evidence across ethnic lines, see Robert Taylor et al, "Religious and
Spiritual Involvement among Older African Americans, Caribbean blacks, and Non-
Hispanic Whites: Findings from the National Survey of American Life." The Journals of
Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences 62, no. 4 (2007): 238-
250. Taylor et al also found two significant interactions between ethnicity and income
("Religious only" characterized wealthy whites and African Americans and Caribbean
Blacks with low incomes) and key demographic factors (Men and youth are more likely
to be spiritual only or neither). Also, see Penny Marler and Kirk Hadaway, “Being
Religious and Being Spiritual in America: A Zero-Sum Proposition?” Journal for the
Scientific Study of Religion 41, no. 2 (June 2002): 289-300. For a similar and earlier
study that faults sociology’s implicit endorsement of this dichotomy, which counters
most believers’ experience and found they were able to integrate them, see Brian
Zinnbauer et al, “Religion and Spirituality: Unfuzzying the Fuzzy,” Journal for the

17 Stephanie Paulsell, “The Square Root of Minus One: Overcoming Pernicious
Dichotomies” Spiritus 7, no.1 (Spring 2007): 86-88. This is something she has done
herself in her work on the spiritual discipline of honoring the body in which she points
out the difficulties of experiencing God in our bodies in light of aspects of a Christian
past (and at times a contemporary culture) that has devalued and feared the body. This is
something she has done herself in her work on the spiritual discipline of honoring the
body in which she points out the difficulties of experiencing God in our bodies in light of
aspects of a Christian past (and at times a contemporary culture) that has devalued and
feared the body. See, Stephanie Paulsell, Honoring the Body: Meditations on a Christian
“being ‘unequivocally good,’” something he finds even in his own casual conversations from the academic classrooms and AAR meetings to church fellowship halls. Instead of seeing spirituality’s task as retrieving a wholly “‘innocent’ and simple tradition in a prestigious and fictitious past,” Orsi presses on spirituality scholars to show where the spiritual can be “thoroughly cultural and historical, as ambiguous as the circumstances within which it arises, implicated in power…as unconscious in motivation as it is as matter of conscious understanding.” Spirituality scholars have worked to identify how spirituality and religion are in relationship, and they find that spirituality is the dimension of religion that consists of experience and transformation.

Spirituality’s acquiring multiple connotations, particularly the ones associated with “spiritual but not religious,” has spurred on extensive scholarly discussions on definitions of spirituality for studying it as an academic field. Differences in definition, some of which lack clarity, may strike some as vexing but they do not have to be so. How many theologies exist that are born of different contexts and make theology a richer field? It is

19 Orsi, “Two Plus Two,” 115. Orsi has done this in his own work on mid-twentieth century Catholic women and their devotional practices to Saint Jude, patron saint of hopelessness. His study of their devotional practices showed they both free and repress the women: their dependency on this intercessor gave them an outlet to cry out about their family pressures and demands in their post war immigrant enclaves, but they only found their voices with Jude in as much as their prayers conformed to the American Catholic culture’s expectations of them as wives, mothers, and daughters. See, Robert Orsi, Thank You St Jude, Women’s Devotion to the Patron Saint of Hopeless Causes. New Haven: Yale Press, 1998.
better not to have too broad a definition that then dilutes spirituality’s meaning in sinking to a “lowest common denominator” and denies particular spiritualities across religions their distinct features.\textsuperscript{21} Let me say that I see this less as an issue that I must now settle with certainty and more something that I will continue to ponder. Below, I offer three accounts of Christian spirituality that present limitations for my current project in addition to the aforementioned “spiritual but not religious” seeker spirituality.

One traditional and historical understanding of Christian spirituality rooted in Catholicism came out of the development of theology (and its divorce from spirituality) as a Western academic discipline during the late Middle Ages. The growing divergence in theology between clergy and laity in the world and those pursuing holiness in monasticism, with a stress on withdrawal and asceticism for the sake of perfection, gradually led to defining spirituality in more dualistic ways that pitted the material against the spiritual. Here, spirituality essentially is understood as a withdrawn life of prayer and contemplation.\textsuperscript{22}

This understanding of spirituality as prayer belonging to the monastic sphere continued into modernity. For example, Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz recollects her time as a novitiate in Peru in the mid 1960s where she was taught that the spiritual life was one of holiness shaped by prayer, meditation, and penance; when she felt a vocational call to be with the poor, and was told that such justice work was not a part of spirituality, she began


\textsuperscript{22} In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, Father Andrew Louth defines spirituality as such. See Andrew Louth, “Theology and Spirituality: A Paper Read by Andrew Louth to the Origen Society in St. John's College.” 30 October 1974. 4, 12-13.
to question its meaning: “I came to realize that what I could not accept was the false notion that the soul is a separate entity, that one can counterpose the body and spirit as if the human person can be split in two…”

Certainly Christian spirituality involves prayer and a connection to the church. However, this particular concept of spirituality does not make room for and take seriously people living in the world and how their embodied practices first, may be joined to and flowing from prayer. It also does not take seriously how bodies help people feel their way to the divine (like Gary listening to country music or petting his cat) rather than impede it.

A second understanding of Christian spirituality, offered by Bernard McGinn is “lived experience of Christian belief.” Of course, people of faith can be inspired in their daily life by biblical stories and tradition’s teachings. Some of the homeless, I discovered had a bible verse they wanted to live by in how they treated others and hoped others would care for them, such as Gary with Romans, Demetrius with the Golden Rule, or Billy with Abraham called to “be a blessing.” However, McGinn’s definition does not explicitly get at the complexities of living out belief. First, it implies that thinking or believing is how we normally work our way to practices, when, in fact, it might be in the

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23 This is not to say that Isasi-Diaz’s novitiate experience from the 1960’s represents that of all monastics today, some of whom might say that their spiritual lives and work have been connected to justice and have honored the body. Quotation from Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, Mujerista Theology (1996), 31-33. Found in Wolfteich, “Animating Questions,” 128.

repeated doing that we come to thinking or believing. For instance, Living Room participants talked about being shown that God was love when they were gently touched or heard by others in the group, not when they were reading about a doctrine of the Trinity. Further, McGinn’s definition could be taken as meaning that the spiritual life is simply a matter of a person applying Christian beliefs to her life as events arise. This notion of faith as belief that is found in scriptural or doctrinal texts and then “applied” has been discarded by practical theology because this “greatly underdescribes” and “renders invisible the full density” of that person’s lived experience. Doctrinal faith does not just flow out in daily living as I saw when Bud and Latanya heard in Wednesday worship that part of following Jesus to the cross or discipleship was watching out for others in community. Their homeless habitus did not allow for that teaching to get so easily “applied” in their lives.

Third, British scholar David Lonsdale approaches the definitional task of Christian spirituality from an ecclesial context. Invoking Nicholas Lash’s metaphor for Christianity as a “school,” Lonsdale sees the church as a school of discipleship with its

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26 McClintock Fulkerson, Places of Redemption, 9. She refers to earlier practical theologians like Don Browning and James Poling who first discarded this “applied” notion of belief to life and practices.
“center and source” found in its liturgy. The church’s task is to educate or form persons in its “school of affections and desires.” For Lonsdale, Christian spirituality is liturgy, “the heart of the church’s pedagogy,” that in its telling, celebrating, and reflecting on the story of Jesus Christ, teaches the church and its members “in the beliefs, attitude, and practices which constitute Christian identity and scholarship.”

I must confess as an Episcopalian who came to love the Episcopal church for its Book of Common Prayer and weekly liturgy centered on the Table, Lonsdale’s notion of Christian spirituality personally resonates with me. The good of Lonsdale’s definition is that it recognizes how the worshipping life of a church matters to spirituality and so does not uphold the “spiritual but not religious” dichotomy. However, those who have studied theology can take for granted that liturgy is forming people in their lived faith because we have been trained to see and think about the formative aspects of worship and we assume that faithful laity are making these connections as well. Also, to posit that Christian spirituality is essentially a church’s liturgy to “school” the faithful obscures the significance that daily lived faith outside the time and space of Sunday worship may have in forming a Christian’s responses to God and others. It also seems simplistic in

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28 Lonsdale, “The Church,” 244-5.
29 Lonsdale, “The Church,” 244.
30 For example, in my final paper for my Th.D. seminar, I interviewed a person leading a prison ministry at his Episcopal church in Chapel Hill, NC. A long time church member, he saw this ministry as a spiritual discipline of justice. When I asked him what in the Episcopal liturgy inspired him to do this ministry or what connections did he make between his spiritual practice and the liturgy, he did not identify any.
assuming that worship participation will form a Christian person’s distinctive Christian identity without taking into account the complexities of how or what other formative powers (such as social incorporative practices) are at work. Finally, this concept of spirituality as “liturgy schooling our desires” nor does it leave much room for daily lived faith outside the time and space of Sunday worship.

Understandings of spirituality by Rowan Williams and Sandra Schneiders provide the most helpful working definitions for my study because they allow the worlds of the homeless to be considered as “real” faith. I am defending the value and adequacy of their versions of spirituality because they allow attention to the radically different lives of the extreme poor homeless people and their lived faith that so typically remain invisible among most Christians and academic theology. Both give a more holistic account of spirituality. Williams states that spirituality is

far more than a science of interpreting exceptional private experiences. It must now touch every area of human experience, the public and social, the painful and negative…the moral and relational world. The goal of a Christian life becomes not enlightenment but wholeness—an acceptance of this complicated and muddled bunch of experiences as a possible theater for God’s creative work. 31

Williams’ point that spirituality is more than interior mystical experiences speaks to the unitary “flow” experiences Roof and Wuthnow heard about from the “spiritual but not religious” in their studies or the “peak” experiences that psychologist Maslow theorized of in his hierarchy of needs and self-actualization (1943, 1968). 32 Williams, then,

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32 Maslow misses that the persons can experience self-transcendence in ways other than mystical peaks. Further, Maslow assumes people can attain the spiritual only when their basic needs of shelter, safety, and belonging are met and so misses how homeless persons
provides a helpful corrective to an account of spirituality that refers to a “spiritual
dimension” in a realm of life belonging all to its own and set apart from the ordinary and
social. He counters these concepts of spirituality privileging intense ego-transcending
experiences that may be attained only by a select few that may take them out (rather than
deeper into) of “the muddled bunch of experiences” of daily social life where God’s
redemptive spirit is at work to create wholeness.

Like Williams, Schneiders calls for a widening of the horizons of spirituality from
being mainly about withdrawal into prayer, one’s beliefs, or a Christian self formed by
worship to include the whole of a person’s experience.33 Schneiders defines spirituality
as “the experience of conscious involvement in the project of life-integration in terms not
of isolation and self-absorption but of self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one
perceives.”34 The “ultimate value” for Christian spirituality, is God revealed in the life
of Jesus Christ and experienced through the gift of the Spirit.35 In short, for Schneiders,
Christian spirituality is the human’s intentional response to God in one’s whole of life
experience. Both Williams and Schneiders offer a more adequate account of spirituality
by overturning the historical development of spirituality’s focus on an elite way of life

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33 Sandra Schneiders, “Theology and Spirituality: Strangers, Rivals, or Partners?”
*Horizons* 13, no. 2 (Fall 1986): 253-274.
34 Ibid
and simplistic notions of it being only prayer, liturgy, or belief and returning spirituality’s involvement to a person’s whole life. This contextualizes spirituality and sees it including everyday material and social realities that can condition our spiritual lives and how they take form.

I want to highlight and clarify four aspects of Schneiders’ definition that can bring into view realities of the homeless: experience as practices, integration as agency, terror, and community. All major scholars in Christian Spirituality take experience as the whole of life as a given for the material subject of spirituality although there is no final consensus on what experience means or how it can best be studied.\(^{36}\) Sheldrake has pointed out that scholars can lessen the vagueness of spirituality and prevent it from becoming so easily detached from faith traditions by focusing on practices.\(^{37}\) Likewise, Diana Butler Bass and Elizabeth Liebert, acknowledge that the concept of practice is more helpful than experience for “fleshing out the interrelationship of lived spirituality and scholarship.”\(^{38}\)


\(^{37}\) Sheldrake, “Spirituality and its Critical Methodology,” in *Exploring Christian Spirituality* eds. Bruce Lescher and Elizabeth Liebert (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2006), 15-32. According to Sheldrake, studying experience presents a problem since a researcher can never apprehend someone’s direct, individual raw experience free of or prior to her narrated interpretation and its cultural context.

I readily accept experience as the given starting point and would like to clarify it for this study with practices—from more traditional spiritual practices such as singing, testimony, or prayer to less traditional practices such as sleeping, tattooing, or listening for sounds of a helicopter that generate an internal good for a homeless person of feeling the dignity of mattering and being Beloved (so, Bass and Dykstra and MacIntyre) to an everyday tactical practice of walking a city where a homeless person, even as a “walking exile” can cobble together sacred spaces (so, de Certeau) to incorporative practices that convey their own personal and social meaning within the gesture’s action (so, Connerton and Bourdieu). Focusing spirituality’s subject of experience on practices allows for the study of clear observable activities that people intentionally (or at times not, as we see with bodily habituations) participate in and do over the course of their lives in church but also in everyday life outside of a church (Wuthnow 2010). These activities express a person’s relationship with or response to God’s reality and can be transformative, particularly in helping people maintain resilience in struggles (Sullivan 2013, 31). Practice can bring attention to embodiment because it is primarily through our bodies in relationship to others that we make sense of our world and come to experience God’s presence or absence.

Second, I want to underscore the agency in Schneider’s “conscious involvement in the project of life-integration” as a feature of spirituality. I have already spelled out what I mean by agency in my theological normative claims. Emphasizing the agency of homeless persons in their spiritualities shows how their lived faith gives them some meaning, hope, perseverance, and joy and an ability to act, even in a world where they
are constrained, and perceive that they matter to themselves, others, and God. Third, when Schneiders calls for spirituality to touch upon the whole of a person’s life, I want to make room for terror in a person’s “hard times.” I do not want to ignore the joy and strength of the homeless, but since tragedy, loss, and suffering, already a part of the human condition, are particularly acute for the homeless, spirituality needs to acknowledge their “hard times.” It is here where the homeless often turn to faith to make meaning of their losses. Traumatic events and the memory of them can diminish their ability to act. Wendy Farley’s idea about terror is helpful here; she calls terror a root passion and adds it to the Desert Fathers’ list. Terror can “choke” our power to love and be loved, to desire, to discern wise action, and to see ourselves as made in the image of God.39 Spirituality needs to acknowledge this terror and the need to heal a homeless person’s terror through activities of compassion that recall a person’s Belovedness.

Finally, a faith community, also taken as a given by Schneiders in her concept of spirituality40, is essential for spirituality but is complicated by a context of homelessness. Earlier I described a homeless spirituality as isolated. To be clear, the homeless may live in an America that is increasingly individualistic and fluid in religious life (Bellah 1985, Sullivan 2013), but their isolation stems from different reasons than the “spiritual but not religious” seekers who choose individualism and detachment from church life (Wuthnow 1998; Roof 1999; Sullivan 2013). That the majority of my homeless subjects had no faith community to call their own was not due to their seeking personal growth from many

places in a sort of spiritual dabbling that characterizes the “spiritual but not religious”
population. Thus, a faith community is not so essential to the homeless person’s spiritual
life as a place where liturgy can “school” them in Christian desires distinctive from the
world or teach them inscriptive traditions. A faith community is essential to provide
them with a place for them to appear with dignity and to understand themselves as fully
human and beloved by God and re-membered into the Body of Christ. In short, a
community facilitating belonging and dignity, the acknowledgement of terror and healing
of it through compassion, agency, and experience focused on practices, are key features
for understanding spirituality among homeless persons who self-identify as Christians.

**Spirituality’s Viability as an Academic Discipline and Concept of Study**

Spirituality’s value for analytical investigations has been contested in sociology
recently by Matthew Wood. In this section, I will lay out Wood’s critique of spirituality
as it has been used, offer the work of Marla Frederick on African American Christian
spirituality as way to question his position, and then move to a discussion of how
Christian spirituality is helpful for scholarly analysis. I want to suggest that Christian
spirituality both as an academic study of lived faith in practical theology and as a
concept for scholarly inquiries—or what Christian spirituality scholars call a “second

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41 Of course, I have been studying it as a major area in my degree in Practical Theology
so I have been formed in my academic study to see it as a part of practical theology’s
work. Some spirituality scholars are trained in other fields and see themselves primarily
as historians, pastoral or systematic theologians etc... I do not want to insist that all work
on spirituality be subsumed under the field of practical theology. Some scholars, such as
Claire Wolfteich, see spirituality as its own discipline but wants it to partner with
practical theology. Although Wolfteich sees them as separate disciplines, I still find some
of her points of resonance between the two immensely helpful.
order” spirituality—does have a rightful place in scholarship and can add value to research in practical theology.

In the most recent Blackwell Companion to Sociology of Religion, Matthew Wood argues that using spirituality for studies in his field is “a problematic endeavor.” According to Wood, the concept of spirituality many sociologists use starts with people’s talk about spirituality that stresses their individual selves. Researchers naively allow their subjects’ talk to become their sociological description for reality, or the analytical category of spirituality. Roof and the early work of Wuthnow on the “spiritual but not religious” could provide a case in point. Further, Wood says, in focusing on spirituality as the individualistic experiences and choices of subjects, many sociologists continue to uphold the dichotomy between ‘spirituality’ and ‘religion.’ Finally—and, I believe this is the key problem for him—such work takes people out of their social contexts. Woods acknowledges that “whilst ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’ may sometimes and in some contexts relate to distinct discourses and practices,” their obvious connection demands one analytical category. He concludes this should be religion and calls on sociologists to re-conceptualize religion in a way that sheds its current assumptions about “rigid institutionalization, hierarchization, and conformity.”

A recent ethnography on spirituality by Marla Frederick, I think, shows that some in social science are capable of using spirituality in the way Woods would prescribe (adequately accounting for social context and religion), and so counters his notion that spirituality cannot be helpful for analysis. I have referenced *Between Sundays* several times in my project already. As Frederick studies the spirituality of black church women from a poor rural part of North Carolina, she aims to fill a scholarly void among social scientists adept at finding the significance of race, gender, and class for understanding a person’s behavior, but then neglect considering spirituality’s influence on a person’s action in the social world (13). Frederick focuses on individual women and their practices in both the private and public spheres, some more traditionally spiritual, some less—from tithing and being in sexual relationships to watching televangelism. Her study definitely does not take their practices out of context for the sake of stressing their individual selves and authority. To be sure, she gives their individual biographies, but as Woods calls for, her study explores how these spiritual practices are embedded not just in their individual biographies but in different contexts from the African American church tradition and their particular church to a detailed analysis of Halifax County’s social and

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46 I found it strange that one of the definitions Wood named unsatisfactory for being too vague and failing to analyze social context was Wuthnow’s recent one based on MacIntyrean practices from “Spirituality and Spiritual Practice,” in *Blackwell Companion to Sociology of Religion*, ed. Richard Fenn (Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 306-320. I mention that here because Frederick’s reliance on practices with her analysis of spirituality (although she never explicitly names McIntyre) does not hamper her ability to contextualize.
economic history that reveals these women’s ongoing struggle for justice with work and education.

Frederick’s study does not perpetuate a dichotomy between spirituality and religion in her use of spirituality as an analytical concept. She gives attention to the African American ecclesial tradition, particularly with the historical role of the black church in the public sphere and the role of black women in both the church and activism. Furthermore, her subjects clearly are involved members in a faith community as the play on her title “Between Sundays” shows. Frederick had the opportunity to work in the spiritual-religious dichotomy with her description of their understanding of their spirituality: the women locate their source of motivation and authority within their personal spirituality and tell her that spirituality is “true worship” because its actions outside of church are connected to a genuine concern for God unlike religion that they see as “going to church” with a focus on denominational affiliation and a routinized worship (15). However, she is careful to note that these women are not underplaying the importance of church in their own spiritual development; rather, they emphasize the significance of their own experiences and actions coming out of worship, once it is over. Further, she is careful not to let this affect her own concept of spirituality for this project: “expressions of faith in God and God’s work” in everyday social interactions of private arenas as well as more public ones (10).

Finally, Frederick’s study shows in multiple ways that spirituality can address rather than cause, as Wood suggests, “sociology of spirituality’s blind spot regarding social power and the way this relates to processes of socialization and to social positions
such as class."47 For example, she shows the women’s complicated relationship tithing that is shaped by their social locations. On one hand, they report it is liberating to tithe and so resist American values of consumerism and getting an opportunity to care for others. On the other hand, their faithful practice can lead to more debt and poor credit. Some may withhold tithes when they worry about their pastor’s leadership and stewardship oppressing women, and may hide this from their husbands who expect their wives to submit to their authority. However, a few then they shortly give their authority and money to him “for the common good” (that they do not acknowledge as a “common good” in a racist society and sexist church) and leave his accountability up to God. Thus, her study helps us gain a more nuanced understanding of social power by her not doing a traditional religious social scientific study on the social structures of the black church but the spirituality of black church women in their everyday lives.

Spirituality may be challenged by some like Woods as to its helpfulness in sociological analysis when its concept is, from his perspective constructed from “spiritual but not religious” subjects. While I appreciate his concerns, I think that spirituality can add value for scholars either partnering with practical theology or scholars who understand themselves working within a subset of practical theology. It adds value in two different but interrelated ways, as a discipline in theological education and in research. I suppose one could argue that adding spirituality as a discipline to theological education only further fragments theology and theological education. But, as Wolfteich says, spirituality can help practical theology understand itself as theology (2009, 142).

Ed Farley’s *Theologia* is relevant to my point here. Farley lays out how theology was once considered a habitus, a personal and sapiential knowledge of God. Farley traces the loss of this understanding, first with a split into mystical and scholarly theology in medieval times and then in the Enlightenment with the beginning of the theological encyclopedia movement and the birth of the four-fold pattern (now sedimented in scholarly guilds) that viewed theology not as a practical lived knowledge of God but as an object and set of truths with the end in ministerial training. This splintering of theology reduced it to specialized sciences of three “pure” theological disciplines (exegetical, dogmatic, church historical) and the one “applied” theological studies (preaching, pastoral care, youth ministry, etc…), which with its focus on the experiential and practical was seen as a step below the other three in teaching mere skills or functions for a minster. Farley shows in the process of this specialization, all four lost their unity in the theological aspect of their subject matter as theology originally was understood as a habitus “engendered by grace and divine self-disclosure.”48

I mention Farley’s work because, as some Christian spirituality scholars have suggested, perhaps the discipline of spirituality and the research it produces recovers this practice of faith that disappeared from theology, and so can provide a way to reintegrate this unifying habitus after theology’s unfortunate division.49 It would be naive to think

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spirituality offers the solution for reintegrating all of theological education (university or church), but I do think it could help recover this for practical theology which shares spirituality’s concern for the practical or lived faith, and I will add in all its ambiguity (lest I begin to run the risk of employing spirituality here in the way Paulsell and Orsi criticized). As Wolfteich says, spirituality’s emphasis on the person’s or faith community’s experiences “literally animates theology, breathing life into it” and keeps it focused on lived faith, reminding practical theology that it should be oriented to a way of life seeking an embodied knowledge of God which is central to spirituality.  

Spirituality also can be valuable in practical theology’s research with the help of practical theology. In its interest in practices “at the heart of theological endeavor,” spirituality can open up practical theology to the experiences, problems, and questions of persons and faith communities who “desire the presence of the transcendent” (Wolfteich 2009 135). To do this, spirituality needs practical theology’s methodology of putting in dialogue theory-laden practices from Christianity with contemporary issues and practices. Wolfteich proposes an approach for spirituality scholars that draw upon the three main approaches mapped out by Sandra Schneiders: historical, anthropological, and theological. Schneiders had originally suggested that scholars work from one of these

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approaches in a study on spirituality, but Wolfteich suggests that for spirituality’s work out of or with practical theology, drawing on all is needed and is analogous to Don Brown’s four movements from *A Fundamental Practical Theology* (Wolfteich 2009, 138).

Spirituality’s need for practical theology in order to articulate theological norms and critically think about practices for the purpose of helping individuals and faith communities make this wisdom their own (Sheldrake 2006; Wolfteich 2009) points to another way that spirituality is a value-added tool for analysis: it attends to transformation (Wolfteich 2009; Sheldrake 2006; Schneiders 2006). The study of spirituality aims to make a difference for how communities and persons live out and understand their faith and is a concept that explores transformation that can come from belief-practices. Spirituality’s work is not just for contributing knowledge about the Christian life of faith but in hopes that knowledge will foster conversations and then will be appropriated for personal or communal formation and transformation.53

I have tried to show that in the research of its larger family or home of practical theology and in its teaching in theological education, spirituality adds value as an analytical concept and a unifying study. Spirituality needs practical theology with its theological approach and methodology. Practical theology needs spirituality with its focus on lived experience of faith, or, as I have emphasized, lived practices with an aim

toward transformation and appropriating knowledge, something practical theology also shares. What remains undone here is my project’s practical theological task of sharing my study’s learnings with individuals and faith communities for their own appropriation in theirs discipleship. I plan to share them with DPC’s congregation through their Christian education program as well as other downtown churches in Nashville. I plan to share my findings with the leaders of the three homeless social worlds to affirm where they offer redemptive activities that nurture a sense of agency and a sense of mattering in the homeless and where they may fall short.

And what of the homeless who participated in this project? I imagine that many of them would prefer I contact them to help them find work or housing rather than share these findings. The very nature of their transient lives presents a challenge of finding several of them who may have already left Nashville or are no longer participating in any of DPC’s homeless social worlds. A few, though, I remain in touch with. They and others I meet offer me the opportunity to practice facial vision and flexibility. And I considered them the real teachers here—it was their knowledges that I hoped to learn from. Even those whose belief-practices did not seem to me redemptive according to my own normative claims, because this is a marginalized population, I am not certain that my role here is to deconstruct and offer them other belief-practices when in the midst of their struggles, theirs seem to bring them strength, comfort, and hope that God is near and desires them as and to be more than displaced.

While I hope that my project has accurately described the spiritualities of the homeless, I am careful to acknowledge that my study has in no way cornered the truth
about homelessness or homeless faith. I also hope my presentations of the homeless social worlds and the lives of faith of the homeless, in a way, testify to God’s presence. Redemption is ambiguous particularly with the tragic realities of stigmatization and loss that the homeless face. Still, I think redemptive life in the Spirit can be seen among some homeless both at DPC as they experience the Living Room, the Wednesday worship, and the street paper vending as sites of lived faith as well as outside of these homeless worlds in their finding sacred spaces where God is made real.
Appendix A
Questions for Homeless and Formerly Homeless Participants

1. Personal Background Information
   * How old are you?
   * Are/have you been married or lived with someone? Do you have any children?
   * Do you stay in touch with your family?
   * Describe your education and any jobs you’ve had.
   * Have you ever or do you now struggle with any mental illness?

2. Past religious practices and beliefs, particularly in relation to suffering
   * Describe the church you grew up in as a young person. Who took you? What do you learn from him/her about God?
   * Was your church or your pastor helpful?
   * Was reading the bible helpful? Which parts?
   * Was singing helpful? Which songs?
   * Looking back, when were times you felt closer to God? Farther away from God?
   * Think back on a really hard time in your life. Where was God during that time? During that hard time, did prayer help you? What was your prayer? Did your church or pastor help you? Did reading your bible help? Why do people go through hard times?

3. Current Church affiliation
   * Currently, do you have a church you go to? How often do you go? What do you like or dislike about it?

4. Subject’s experience of homelessness.
   * How long have you been without a permanent address?
   * Tell me about how you came to lose your permanent address.
   * Would you consider yourself homeless?
   * If I’m talking to a homeless woman, I could ask what it is like being where she is as a mother, daughter, or wife. If a homeless man, what is it like being where he is as a father, son, or husband
   * Would living in a stable home transform or change you? How so?
   * Do you have a community of friends?
   * What has helped you cope? What things did you have to do to survive as a homeless man/woman?
   * What have been some of the most difficult aspects of being without a permanent address?
   * Tell me about a typical day in your life. (Tell me about your day yesterday.)

5. Questions for Subjects based on which ministry they participate
   A) The Contributor
*Why do you work at *The Contributor*/go to the Living Room?  
*Tell what it is like being a vendor of a street paper in Nashville. (More specific: Tell me about the last time you were selling papers.)*  
*Does it make a difference to you being a woman/man vendor?  
*Tell me about your spot where you sell. What does your body feel like when you are selling papers in that spot? What do you smell in that spot? What do you see?*  
*Do you ever feel closer to God in it? Farther from God in it?  
*Tell me about the customers in your spot. Are any friends?*  
*What do you enjoy about being a vendor?  
*What is hard about being a vendor?  
*Are there rules you have to follow? Do you think the rules are helpful?*  
*Do you get a say in the rules?*  
*Is *The Contributor* staff trying to teach you something?*  
*Do you think people here are treated differently if they are men or women? Because of their color?*  
*Have you written any of the stories and articles?*  
*Do you read the stories and articles? What did you think about them?*  
*Do you think you are giving a message (testifying) to people when you are out there selling papers?*  
*Are you giving a message or testifying to something for God?  
*Do you think *The Contributor* is making a difference for you? How so?*  

B) The Living Room  
*Why do you come to the Living Room?  
Follow ups: How did you start coming to it? How long have you been coming?  
*What’s the vibe like here? How does your body feel when you are in the Living Room?*  
*Do you ever feel closer to God in it? Farther from God?  
*Do you have friends here? Are people different here?*  
*What do you enjoy about being at the Living Room?*  
*What is hard about being at the Living Room?*  
*Do you think the LR is making a difference for you? How so?  
*Are there rules you have to follow? Do you think the rules are helpful?*  
*Do you get a say in the rules?*  
*Is this group trying to teach you something?  
*Do you think people here are treated differently if they are men or women? Because of their color?*  

The Living Room Monthly Retreat participants:  
*Why do you go to the retreat at Penuel Ridge?*  
*Tell me what you do when you go on retreat for the day.  
*How does your body feel when you are on retreat at Penuel Ridge? Do you feel closer to God? Farther from God? What does God look like when you are there? Taste like? Smell like?*  
*Do you pray? What do you pray for?
*Is there anything you don’t like? What would you change/add to the retreat?
*Do you think the people who run the retreat are trying to teach you anything?
*Do you have friends at this retreat? Are people different here?

C) Questions for Persons who Attend Wednesday Worship and Lunch
*Why do you come to this service?
*How long have you been coming to the worship service?
*Do you go to other worship services in Nashville? Is it different from them?
*How long do you have to wait outside to come in for the worship service? What’s that like being in line? (Follow Up: What do people talk about or do while they wait?)
*Do you think of DPC as your church?
*Is this church or the pastor helpful?
*Do you have friends at this worship service? Is it a place you can find support? Are people different here?
*Is there anything that you like about the worship service?
*Is there anything that you don’t like about the worship service?
*Is there anything you wished the worship service included that it doesn’t right now?
*Is there anything you get from the sermons or teachings on the bible?
*What do you think he is trying to teach you in the sermons?
*Is there anything that you don’t like about the sermons?
*Sanctuary space: How does your body feel when you are sitting in the sanctuary? What does the sanctuary feel like to you? What do you see when you are in there? What does it smell like?
*Would you like it if “homies” also came to this service?
*Do you attend the lunch after the service?

6. Subject’s current spiritual practices (material religion and prayer) and beliefs.

Material Religion
*Do you read any devotional literature or the bible now? Do you have any favorite bible verses? Hymns?
*Do you have anything that helps you keep your faith strong?
   prompts: tattoos, music, picture, bible
Follow ups: When you hold/see/touch/read it, what feeling do you get? How did you come to have it?
*Since you’ve been without a permanent address, where do you most feel God’s presence? Where do you feel farthest from God?

Prayer:
*Do you ever pray? When? Why? What do you say? How did you learn how to pray?
*Tell me about the last time you prayed.
*Since you’ve been without a permanent home, has your frequency of prayer changed? Have your prayers changed? (increase, decrease, remain the same?)

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*To whom do you pray? (God? Jesus? Mary? A Saint?)
*How do you feel about the --- to whom you pray?
*Do you use singing in your prayers?
*What do you like to be doing when you pray?
    Prompts: rock in a rocking chair, Kneel, Walk, Look at something, etc..
*Do you have particular places and times you like to pray?
*Can you tell me what it makes you feel like on your inside when you pray?
*Do you ever have a difficult time praying? (Tell me more about that.)
*Have your prayers been answered? (Tell me more about that.)
*Has God ever let you down? (Has God ever lifted you up?)
*Do you think God is interested in the outcome of your life?

Last question for everyone:
*Is there any question you wish had been asked?
Appendix B

Interviews with Persons who photographed where God is (Sacred Spaces and Times)

Oral Directions:
Here is a disposable camera. I am interested in how you experience God in your everyday life wherever you are. I want to know where and when you feel God around you. Will you please take pictures of where you feel close to God as you go through your day? Anywhere you see God, taste God, smell God, or feel God’s presence, take a picture. When you finish taking pictures, call me. I will get the camera and get the pictures developed. We can meet again because I want you to tell me about the pictures and what you saw. I will keep the photographs as part of my research data. (If the participant asks for copies of the photos I will give them copies of only the photos that were used during their interview.)

I am asking you to do this because I am a student and want to use your pictures in my school project. I am doing research to help pastors and churches understand how people feel close to God while they are living without a permanent home and going through hard times.

Questions for the interview as well look at the pictures:
*Would you take me through these pictures? Tell me what we’re looking at. Why did you take this one? Where in this picture do you see God’s presence?
Appendix C
Questions for Caregivers/Leaders of the Three Homeless Ministries

Questions for DPC pastor leading Wednesday Worship
- How long have you been leading this worship service for the homeless?
- Why do you provide this worship service?
- Tell me about what you think the homeless need from you as a downtown pastor.
- What do you want to provide them when they come here to this service?
- In your work here, what have you observed about how the homeless practice their faith? What have you observed about their understandings of God?
- Are you trying to teach them anything or convey a message in your preaching?
- Does the service include:
  - a celebration of the Lord’s Supper?
  - singing?
  - a confession of sin?
  - Passing of Peace? Healing?
  - Follow up on these ask: Would you tell me about your decision to include or not include this from the service?
  - What do the homeless persons tell you about why they come to the service?
  - Do you hear them call this their church or refer to themselves as members of your congregation or call you their pastor?

Questions for leaders/founders of the Contributor and the Living Room
- How did you get involved with working with homeless?
- Follow up: What inspired or motivated you to do this work?
- Tell me about what you understand the goals and work of the Contributor/the Living Room to be.
- Are there rules you all follow at the C/the LR? Do you think the homeless participants get a say in the rules?
- What are you trying to provide the homeless here?
- Are you trying to teach the homeless something at the C/LR?
- From your experiences with the homeless, what have you observed or what have you learned about how they practice or express their faith? How they understand and talk about God?
- Tell me about the sense of community here at the C/the LR.
- Follow up: Is this a place where people make friends? Where they find support?
- Are there any points of tension or conflict at the C/the the LR?
- Follow up: How are you working through that?
- Tell me about how you see the work of the other homeless ministries at DPC.
- Follow up: Do you see your work at the C/the LR connecting to the other ministries?
Appendix D
Written Informed Consent Form

I am a doctoral student in practical theology doing research for my dissertation that I hope will help pastors and their churches care for homeless people and better understand their lives of faith. This interview with you is part of that research. I want to ask you questions about your involvement with the Wednesday worship service for the homeless at Downtown Presbyterian Church, the Living Room, or The Contributor. This should take about an hour, but we can take as long as you want. You can skip any of my questions, and you can quit at any time. With your permission, I will audio tape this conversation. I will transcribe the recording and keep a copy of the transcript in a password protected file on my personal computer. I will keep the transcript in my computer for five years beyond the last publication from my research, at which point it will be destroyed. I will keep the audio recording in a locked file cabinet in my private office until data collection is complete and transcriptions are made, at which point it will be destroyed. I may want to quote you when I report my results in my dissertation. If I have something I want to quote you on in an article or book, I will give you a chance to review the quote; I won’t quote you in any reports or publications without your permission.

If you decide to withdraw your participation, simply notify me and I will erase any audio recordings and delete any transcripts.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Committee at 919-684-3030 or at ORS-Info@Duke.edu. If you have questions about this research, you may contact me at 615-460-6000.

- I voluntarily agree to be interviewed for this project.
- The purpose of this project, procedures to be followed, risks and benefits have been explained to me.
- I have been allowed to ask questions, and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.
- I have been told whom to contact if I have questions, to discuss problems, concerns, or suggestions related to the research, or to obtain information or offer input about the research.
- I have read this consent form and agree to be in this study, with the understanding that I may withdraw at any time.
- I have been told that I will be given a signed and dated copy of this consent form.
- I do/do not (circle one) give my permission for the interview to be audio recorded.
Name of Participant ________________________________
Signed __________________________________________
Date _______________________________________________

Name of Researcher taking consent ________________________
Signed ____________________________________________
Dated _____________________________________________
Appendix E

ORAL CONSENT SCRIPT

I am a student. I am doing research for a project at school that I hope will help pastors and their churches care for people who don’t have a home and are having a tough time. This interview with you is part of that research. I am interested in people’s faith during hard times, particularly of being without a home.

I want to ask you questions about your life, and about your prayers, going to church, and what you believe about God. Some of these questions may make you feel sad as you think about really difficult times.

The interview should take about an hour. But we can take as long as you want.

You don’t have to do this interview at all. It is up to you. You can skip any of my questions, and you can quit at any time.

Would it be OK if I taped our conversation? If so, I will keep the tape locked in a cabinet in my office at home. I will write out some of your words exactly as you say them, and keep a copy on my computer that only I can use. I will keep the tape until I have written down everything that you said and then I will destroy it. I will keep the written notes in my computer for five years after the project is completely over and then I will delete it. I might put some of your exact words in a book or article that I write, but I won’t include your name, unless you want me to. If you want, I can give you a different name when I talk about you in my report. This is to protect your privacy. I will say, though, whether you are a man or a woman, your race, and about how old you are.

If you decide you don’t want to be in my study, just let me know and I will destroy the tapes and my notes.

Are you willing to talk with me? (If yes) Is it alright if I start the recorder?

Here is more information for you.
Appendix F
Handout for Oral Consent Process

What my research is about:
Faith of persons without a permanent address.

Why I am doing this research: To help pastors and churches help people without a permanent address.

Kinds of questions I will ask: About how you came to be without a home, about your faith now and when you were little and during times when life was hard. I will protect your privacy.

If you have any questions about your rights as a person in a research study, contact the Duke Office of Research Support, 919-684-3030. If you have questions about this research, call me at 615-460-6000.

Remember, you can quit this interview at any time, and you don’t have to answer any questions you don’t want to answer.
Figure 1. The Six Wards of the Old City Center
Figure 2. Placing Slums in Nashville

City of Nashville ward boundaries. Source: map of Nashville, 1839, Tennessee State Library and Archives. Drawn by Minnie Childers, The University of the South.
Figure 3. Map of Nashville Homeless Shelters and their Relocations
#1. The relocated Women’s Mission (1987-today)
#2. The relocated Salvation Army (1960 and then expanded 1987-2010)
#5, 7, 8. Women’s Mission, Men’s Mission, Salvation Army (and RITI headquarters on the Salvation Army’s property as of 1987) at one end of what was “Dodge City Skid Row” in Lower Broad. All of them are in a one block radius between 5th Ave and 6th Ave along Demonbreun. The Arena is now on this block.

#6 DPC on 5th and Church

#9 SRO Sam Davis Hotel on 7th and Commerce (that then became a corner of the Nashville Convention Center)
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Biography

Cynthia Curtis was born on July 7, 1972 in Milledgeville, GA. She graduated with a B.A. in English and Psychology from the University of Richmond in May 1994 and completed an M.A.T. in English from Vanderbilt University in May 1997. Cynthia completed an M.Div. from Vanderbilt University in May 2006 where she earned the Elliot Shephard Prize in Church History and wrote “Pimp-Whore Parties: Exploration or Exploitation?” that appeared in Women’s VU and the Vanderbilt Hustler. She currently is a member of the Society for Christian Spirituality and the Society for Pastoral Theology.