Hello Symbolic Boundaries network colleagues:

Here is a chapter from my forthcoming book, *Elusive Togetherness*. Of course I'd love to know what boundaries scholars think; I regret not being able to meet up with you at this past ASA. I picked this chapter because it shows how a community service group's boundary-drawing may make it hard for the group to relate across racial divides even when, or maybe because, the group insists on being race-blind. Their boundary-drawing was not intentionally racist in any event. In case people want some background on the chapter, I've pasted into this note a (shamelessly promotional?!) précis of the book.

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Elusive Togetherness:
Church Groups Trying to Bridge America's Divisions

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Paul Lichterman

Many scholars and citizens alike have counted on civic groups to create
broad ties that bind society. Some hope that faith-based civic groups
will spread their reach as government retreats. Yet few studies ask how,
if at all, civic groups reach out to their wider community. Can religious
groups, long central in civic America, create broad, empowering social ties
in an unequal, diverse society?

Over three years, Paul Lichterman studied nine liberal and conservative
Protestant-based volunteering and advocacy projects in a mid-sized
American city. He listened as these groups tried to create bridges with
other community groups, social service agencies, and low-income people,
just as the 1996 welfare reforms were taking effect. Counter to
long-standing arguments, Lichterman discovered that powerful customs of
interaction inside the groups often stunted external ties and even shaped
religion's impact on the groups. Comparing groups, he found that
successful bridges outward depend on group customs which invite
reflective, critical discussion about a group's place amid surrounding
groups and institutions.

Combining insights from Alexis de Tocqueville, John Dewey, and Jane Addams
with contemporary sociology, *Elusive Togetherness* addresses enduring
questions about civic and religious life that elude the popular "social
capital" concept. To create broad civic relationships, groups need more
than the right religious values, political beliefs, or resources. They
must learn new ways of being groups.

Chapter 5

Christ-like Care: Social Servants

Planting a little love dynamite

"This is a great day for your churches, and for the city of Lakeburg," Evan announced. For

weeks leading up to this hot, July evening, Evan had been working with county social service

people, identifying families that were loosing their welfare benefits. Evan's Adopt-a-Family

program would match up these families with local church groups of six or eight volunteers each.

Adopt-a-Family volunteers would learn how to support the family while the breadwinner cast about

for paid work. This evening, fifty churchgoers, most from theologically conservative, evangelical

Protestant churches and all white, had come to Adopt-a-Family's orientation meeting in an airy

church sanctuary. Evan explained how Adopt-a-Family sprung forth from a vision that came to a

woman in his prayer group, months before: "People were going around planting love dynamite, to

blow up the barriers of isolation, indifference, hopelessness." The answer to a prayer, the project was

also the answer to Evan's own question of what Christians could do about welfare reform.

Now Evan introduced the keynote speaker, Teri, an African-American educator and poet in

her mid-40s. Her metaphors of Christian love sounded much gentler than dynamite. Teri proceeded

to walk down each row of pews, shaking each volunteer's hand. She wanted to greet us as brothers

and sisters in Christ, she said after her quiet tour of greetings. A square sticker on Teri's yellow

tunic proclaimed "I'm special." Teri told us her name was short for terrific. She had learned a lot

from children, she said. She taught in a Christian after-school program in a mostly African-American, low-income neighborhood. "How I relate to children and how they relate to me helps me understand how I relate to the Lord," Teri said. Adults are God's children too. We could see each adult in these families as a unique child of God, a gift, not a burden. "We only have to ask for spiritual eyes to see."

The title of Teri's handout sheet read "Christ-like Care." That is what Teri had modeled for us on her opening round of greetings. Each individual was a gift to behold. To remark on the adopted families' social backgrounds, to note that the families were mostly black, that they lived in poor neighborhoods, would only bring up "cultural barriers." That would be negative. Teri knew about cultural differences, she assured us, and had spoken about them to other audiences, but that was not why she was here tonight. "I'm not going to do a cultural thing. I'm going to speak from what I know from God." What she knew with quiet certainty was that each individual was special, and deserved to be served as one would serve God.

Project leaders and volunteers agreed that "Christ-like care" was the best way to word what the project did. Christ-like care, Teri pointed out, meant being not just a friend but someone who served the Lord by serving others, someone who practiced compassion in light of biblical teachings. Christ-like care was not about proselytizing people, as Evan would explain several different times. It would model Christian goodness in action, do what Jesus would do.

Bridging, evangelical style

Adopt-a-Family's plan for Christ-like care was very ambitious: Like Catherine's social critics, Adopt-a-Family represented an alternative to the conventional script of volunteering. Very unlike the social critics, these volunteers were going to create personal relationships. As Evan liked to put it, church groups were going to move out of their "comfort zones," and dare to get involved in

their families' lives. Evan told the orientation the same thing in the same words that county social

services director Norma used to address her audience of URC volunteers earlier in the year: Church

people could offer the "relationships," the "human element," that social workers could not give

clients entering the new world of limited welfare benefits. But relationships in Adopt-a-Family

meant something different from relationships in the URC's world of networkers and volunteers.

Unlike the URC volunteers, Adopt-a-Family volunteers in this church sanctuary were excited, and a

little anxious about their new role. They felt like they were signing on to something much bigger

than a monthly stint at a homeless shelter—and they were. One woman marveled at the end of the

orientation, "This is what things must have been like in 100 A.D.," when followers of Jesus were

fashioning a new way of life.

Christ-like caring depended partly on the helping hand of social service agencies, though

Adopt-a-Family volunteers learned to think of their project as very different from anything

government might do. When Bryan, a white, county housing services employee in his 30s, spoke at

the orientation, he offered homey, practical advice—and none of the facts and figures and social

service jargon I'd heard at county social workers' Safety Net meetings. He titled his presentation,

"Building the Ark." Laying out a time-line for building a protective ark of relationships with the

families, Bryan told volunteers to "listen to needs, assess needs, initiate creative ways to meet

needs." But he assured us he did not mean assessing needs "in a complicated social work way," but

more in the loving way that Teri would.

Behind the scenes, complicated or at least careful administrative work by Lakeburg's county

welfare agency had turned up eight willing families for the project's first run. Twenty-five churches

had showed some interest in the project, but by the orientation in July 1997, a total of seven had

organized volunteer groups to serve the families.[1] Over the next half year, six[2] mostly white church

groups served their mostly African-American adopted families. Church group volunteers

accompanied family members to appointments with doctor and social workers, put on picnics, took

kids to McDonald's, threw a baby shower, bought telephone service for a family, took moms

shopping at second-hand stores and grocery stores, and invited families to go Christmas caroling.

They prayed for their families, privately and in church group meetings.   They took risks that no

other volunteers in this study took. Reaching out stretched their comfort zones painfully.

What exactly did Adopt-a-Family accomplish for its families? The church groups did not set

out to teach family breadwinners employable skills or help place them in jobs, the way some church-

based welfare-to-work programs began to do under new federal welfare policies.[3] Helping the

families in small, practical ways, their main form of support was moral. It would be very hard to

measure the program's success by tangible outcomes. Evan and the church group members agreed

that the program's overriding goal was for volunteers and families to create enduring connections, to

become part of each others' lives. That was Christ-like care, and that, was the way to make real

change happen.

Six months later, Christ-like care had become extremely perplexing for the volunteers.

Staying connected with the families at all had been a challenge. Church groups puzzled over why

three of the families left Lakeburg suddenly. One group had discovered that the mother of its family

was not in the welfare reform program at all; she was certified disabled and did not need to worry

that her benefits would end if she did not find work. Bridge-building proved an elusive goal. At the

workshop, pastor Nick from one of the groups I studied looked back on the past half-year:

"How quickly idealism goes away in the face of need. The long-term thing the welfare

system was doing--and to think we could come in and--the idealistic side of me [hoped it was

possible.] It's one thing to go to the grocery store, but. . .I hoped it was different. I find that

I'm very tired. Long-term care is what's needed, and how to deal with it. I'd like to think I

could, but I have a way to go."

The next month, this pastor's group dropped out of Adopt-a-Family. Several other church groups

joined up over the next year. Three years after the initial orientation, the Adopt-a-Family program

was no longer being mentioned in fundraising letters written by Adopt-a-Family's parent

organization, Tumbling Walls. By the time American voters were hearing about the virtues of faith-

based social service during the 2000 presidential election, Adopt-a-Family's experiences already

showed that even Pastor Nick's steadfast faith was not enough to create supportive relationships

across social divides.

Spiraling off of the map

By participating in Adopt-a-Family, the volunteers spiraled briefly into the larger

community. Their orientation session introduced them to social service providers who told them all

about the world of emergency services. Some of the volunteers visited food pantries with their

family members. A woman in one church group talked to social workers at a county housing agency

several times, trying to find out whether her adopted family could qualify for subsidized rent. Pastor

Nick, quoted above, learned about the Salvation Army while hunting down baby shower presents for

his adopted family's mom. Evan kept in regular contact with Lakeburg social service personnel. He

liked to describe the project as an opportunity for volunteers to "get to know our neighbors again."

Adopt-a-Family church groups could have gotten volunteers into new, ongoing connections with

neighbors, social service workers or other community groups in Lakeburg. The church groups did

not build these bridges, at least partly because their own customs did not let them.

Was it all just misguided from the start? There are good reasons the project could have

created satisfying relationships *from the church groups' viewpoint*, if not necessarily the families'.

At the outset, Adopt-a-Family had both expertise and local knowledge. Four leading participants

had social work experience: Before becoming an evangelical Christian, Evan had worked in the

state's department of social services. He knew the value of social networks. In the church group I

followed most intensively, pastor Nick had been a state-employed social worker, too. Another

member, Keith, made his living as co-director of a religiously sponsored social service organization

in a nearby town. Jerry, in another church group, was a high-level social service administrator who

had spent two years learning about community development. Participants like Jerry and Keith were

in regular contact with many other social workers and administrators as part of their jobs, and they

had experience with recipients of support too, of course. They had the kind of social capital that

could have eased the way for Adopt-a-Family to establish a niche in the social service world. But as

researchers Bartkowski and Regis (2003) point out in their own study of faith-based social service

groups, it is not enough for a church group to have access to social capital. The group has to

"activate" those connections. Adopt-a-Family encouraged volunteers to build connections from

scratch, more than mobilizing social connections and know-how.

Adopt-a-Family cannot stand in for all evangelical Protestant volunteer groups, much less for

evangelical-led social justice efforts.[4] Still, it represents the style of civic engagement that many

evangelicals might honor when they are acting with their religious "hats" on. The social spiral

argument does not help us understand this group style or its consequences for relationships beyond

the group. The church groups tried to move out into the wider community *without* deepening their

connection to the wider community; figuratively, they tried to float above it. On the one hand,

volunteers were sensitive to the families' social context, especially their racial backgrounds. They

worried that their minority families might not appreciate white volunteers' help. On the other hand,

they *worked* at conceiving their families, and themselves, apart from social contexts altogether.

Volunteers talked as if racial differences, and differences in privilege, were not truly real and should

not matter. Thoughtfully sensitive to *differences* between their families and themselves, the volunteers did not move from sensitivity to active, reflective curiosity about a bigger social world that made "differences" into inequalities, as well as barriers to communication. They worked hard to imagine themselves and their families without social coordinates at all, as compassionate servants and special individuals in need.

Focussing intently on individuals, the volunteers were trying hard to avoid racism. They meant to take individuals each as infinitely valuable persons. These were not the smug bigots that secular or religious liberals sometimes imagine Christian conservatives to be (see Smith 2000). When purely interpersonal relating became frustrating, members did reach for quick racial or "cultural" explanations of their perplexities. Their way of not being racist, ironically, lead them to trade on some pat, racial characterizations instead of learning more about the people they worked so hard to serve.

Jane Addams had wanted would-be "helpers" of the poor to face perplexing contacts in everyday life with reflexivity rather than certainty. She bid them to change their own sense of who they were, to become citizens all over again *in relation to* the people they formerly saw as the served. Adopt-a-Family volunteers met plenty of perplexity as they tried earnestly to serve ex-welfare receiving families. They remained certain of the servant's humble mission; the social relations of their servanthood went unexamined. I am suggesting that the project would have been less frustrating for the church groups had they practiced more reflexivity, though that might have made them change the terms of the project too. A very brief comparison case amplifies my claim.

Studying an evangelical Protestant group

Adopt-a-Family was exclusively Christian, while the HRA, the Justice Task Force, and Park Cluster were not. Evan administered Adopt-a-Family and several other projects, including a

campaign to distribute free videos about Jesus, as the executive director of an umbrella organization,

Tumbling Walls. The organization's advisory board included local pastors, a construction company

executive, and a black Christian women's group leader. How could I carve out a role in the project?

When a mailing in December 1996 informed me that Tumbling Walls was planning a program to

serve ex-welfare recipients, I had just started following the Urban Religious Coalition. Excited at

the chance to compare efforts across theological lines, I sounded out my idea for writing about

Adopt-a-Family with Evan, the following spring. Evan welcomed me to observe the project. He

was not sure whether or not non-Christians should do any of the volunteer work of Adopt-a-Family.

The point, after all, was for Christians to model Christian unity for the "Church in Lakeburg,"[5] which

Evan criticized as too complacent and too focussed on its denominational differences. I wondered if

Evan took me as a supporter of welfare reform--eager to see ordinary citizens make the new policies

work, or a religious person eager to see other people of faith move into community life, or a

disaffected Jew opening himself to conversion, under the cover of research. Evan invited me to

attend Adopt-a-Family's meetings, and distributed a short description of my project to the board.

At the orientation, I figured out that I would learn a lot more about Adopt-a-Family if I could

participate alongside one of the church groups. I had taken a seat near some people listening to a

woman's story about driving a car into a lake, twice, each time by accident. The woman seemed to

re-live her bemused bewilderment as she told the tale; everyone laughed in disbelief. I was happy to

have found people with a sense of humor. When Evan asked the groups to talk over their first plans,

I realized I had been sitting amidst a church volunteer group, and made sure Evan would not mind if

I introduced myself to the jovial group with the unlucky lakeside driver. The group's informal

leader, associate pastor Nick of Community in Christ church, invited me to become a part of the

group and "get a real insider's perspective." "We don't feel like guinea pigs," he assured me--not that

I had asked. I felt lucky, and still a little queasy at the thought of being proselytized, but determined

to carry on. I accepted his gracious offer to join the group, and attended the Community in Christ

group's monthly meetings until the group withdrew from the program.

I listened carefully and participated lightly. I enjoyed the group's dry humor; I enjoyed the

group members in a way they would honor--as individuals each with special talents and dreams. I

brooked pastor Nick's subtle and not-so-subtle forms of Christian testifying to me with curiosity and

forbearance. Communicating his faith might be part of a civic relationship in his eyes. The group in

turn was wonderfully hospitable. When I told them at the first meeting that "you should feel free to

ask me to leave if you ever want me to," Angie responded that "you should feel free to leave if you

ever want to." A gently ironic twist on my sober researcher's etiquette was just what I needed to feel

more comfortable.

Was this group different from the other ones at the orientation? Had I been drawn to it

because its members laughed a lot, because they were somehow more like me than the other groups?

Over the next two years I acquainted myself with one of the other church groups, from Lakeside

Reformed Church. Community in Christ and Lakeside Reformed were both almost entirely white.

Community in Christ's group was younger on average; its ten regular members ranged from mid-30s

to 70s, while the majority of members in the Lakeside Reformed group were in their 60s or 70s.

The two groups ended up being good choices: They were the two most active groups in

Adopt-a-Family. They also represented very different traditions within the constellation of

conservative Protestant theology. Community in Christ's pastor Nick explained that his non-

denominational church was "part charismatic, part evangelical." Lakeside Reformed was affiliated

with a denomination, the Reformed Church in America, one of the conservative heirs of the

centuries-old reformed Protestant tradition. While their worship styles and theological vocabulary

differed, their Adopt-a-Family church groups practiced very similar group-building customs. Pastors

of both churches identified with evangelicals at URC-convened meetings of church leaders, and used

a Jesus-centered language to describe their place in Lakeburg; for these reasons I tag them

"evangelical," mindful that the tag works better as a rough social identity than a specific theological

one. The Lakeside Reformed group stayed in the program longer than Community in Christ's, but

both enjoyed similar satisfactions, and endured similar challenges trying to relate to low-income,

African American families from one of Lakeburg's minority neighborhoods.

Institutional context: "Can anyone get us connected to families on welfare?"

>We've professionalized care. It used to be that my parents would
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>care for people who lived down the street, in the neighborhood, but we let that go. I don't
>
>know the exact history of it--there was the New Deal. . . and then government got more
>
>involved, and then government said 'we're the best'.

This is what Evan told me during our first conversation. He said people had to learn to care

about their neighbors all over again. Evan insisted at an Adopt-a-Family board meeting,

"professionals are not the only ones that can care. Neighbors can care. . .we've got to be willing to

care for people as good neighbors." It sounded like Evan was saying that ordinary people needed to

take more responsibility for society—as citizens, not only as Christians motivated by Jesus'

example. Evan sometimes sounded like Donald, who had urged the URC's Humane Response

Alliance to "reconnect the caring community" in response to welfare reform. Evan and Donald

would have agreed heartily that Christians had a biblical mandate to care for poor people. Christian

compassion can take different forms, though, and Adopt-a-Family prized the compassion of deep

interpersonal relationships over the compassion of service networks and plug-in volunteering.

Evan worked hard to make connections and find families. He visited community centers,

talked with public health nurses, conferred with county social workers. Dealing with these contacts

and connections seemed more of a necessary chore than something worth teaching to Adopt-a-

Family volunteers. Evan complained a lot about the administrative work. "It takes so much work, just for neighbors to be neighbors!" He repeated three times at the first steering committee meeting in Spring 1997 that he wanted to hear from anyone, "even you, Paul," who could "get us connected to families on welfare." From the start, families on welfare were distant neighbors.

County social service workers offered the initial opportunity for Evan's project to receive families, and they offered resources the project needed in order to keep going. Evan was always careful to say that the volunteers needed to "honor the systems already in place" for dealing with welfare recipients. At a steering board meeting, Evan asked, "What if an emotional, psychiatric crisis comes up? The church [group] feels responsible now. What should the volunteer do?" Pauline, the psychologist on the board, answered without hesitation: "You need a resource." She said the family would have to be referred somewhere.

Human service professionals, especially state-employed ones, would be a moral last resort. Recall Brian telling volunteers at the orientation that they could "assess needs" of their families, but "not in a social worker way, but more like Teri." Church group leader Nick emphasized that donating clothes to the group's adopted family did not constitute "a new kind of welfare," and one member affirmed several times that "we're not just another government program." Still, Adopt-a-Family depended on social service agencies, even more than did the HRA. The HRA generated a variety of projects that were supposed to strengthen civic caring in Lakeburg apart from responding to the consequences of welfare reform. Adopt-a-Family in contrast defined itself very specifically in the terms of welfare policy reform by developing a volunteer program especially for ex-welfare recipients. But Adopt-a-Family's relationship to governmental agencies was hard for the church groups to discuss at any length within their customary limits. Government agencies were an "other" against which the project drew its own boundaries. County employee Bryan, pictured above, had cued in the volunteers already: He told them at the opening orientation that the policy changes were

complicated and that even he did not understand them. They were disorienting. He dramatized the point with a little exercise. He invited volunteers to try writing their names on paper sheets held to their foreheads: Most people who took the challenge wrote their names backwards. Bryan did not invite people to feel a sense of ownership of public policy, in other words. The message was more that these complicated matters were not worth trying to master. A protective ark of caring relationships would ride out the sea change in policy.

To build and populate the ark, someone needed to identify welfare-receiving families that would be good candidates for Adopt-a-Family; Lakeburg County Social Services identified candidates for Evan. Someone needed to check potential volunteers' legal records for any signs that a volunteer might be too risky to welcome as a servant; the state Department of Records offered the service for a low fee. Someone needed to give volunteers at least a little information about family members' circumstances so that volunteers would know why a family was in the program, why a mother needed a ride to a doctor. A public health nurse and a work-preparedness trainer passed that kind of information along to the church groups that I studied. These were necessary connections, but not the heart of Christ-like care. Evan kept up these connections, so volunteers could do the real work of caring.

Like the HRA, Adopt-a-Family used state-sponsored opportunities to carve out a niche in the new social contract.   County social service people seemed ready, even eager, to let Adopt-a-Family become part of the social service world. Social service people were showing a "remarkable openness" to religious groups, Evan said. Adopt-a-Family defined the opportunities very differently from HRA. How exactly did evangelical Protestantism influence the project's response to the county's new openness?

The faith connection

Evangelicals in civic life: beyond received wisdom

Evangelical Christians constitute an increasingly large presence in American life.[6] There are compelling reasons to find out how evangelical church groups create civic connections. Yet, earlier scholarship may have dissuaded sociologists from investigating closely *how* evangelicals reach out apart from proselytizing. Scholars often have argued that in the last century, mainline Protestant churches like the ones in the HRA were public-oriented or "worldly," while evangelical or fundamentalist churches were more other-worldly, focussing on personal piety inside demanding churches that channeled much of their congregants' volunteer work to the church itself.[7] Recent studies are reconsidering the received wisdom that evangelical Protestants do not get very involved in the community beyond their own churches. Sociologists Regnerus and Smith (1998), for instance, find that evangelicals participate in religiously based community groups *more* than mainline Protestants or Catholics, and are often more active in lobbying and voting than other Christians. Studies by Mark Chaves et al. (2002) and Robert Wuthnow (1999d), on the other hand, maintain that evangelicals are less likely than mainline Protestants to volunteer in civic efforts beyond their own churches.

Is there is a distinctive style of volunteering among evangelicals who do reach out? If so, then the growing evangelical presence may be changing the shape of American civic life profoundly. But we cannot find out if we stick only with the received terms of debate about whether or not conservative Protestants are less civically engaged than other Christians. The "actual connections" between faith and civic engagement are not so well understood yet (Wuthnow 1999d, p. 23). Chaves and his colleagues (2002) have found that mainline and non-mainline Protestant traditions follow different patterns of civic activity even apart from the (significant) influence of theology; they argue convincingly that none of the currently prominent explanations for these differences are completely adequate. The case of Adopt-a-Family suggests that group customs matter apart from theological

belief systems if we want to understand how evangelicals both move out into and recede from the

wider world.

Adopt-a-Family sounded different from the URC-sponsored groups in this book. Contrast

Teri's vocabulary of Christ-like care with URC director Donald's talk of civic ties. No participant in

Adopt-a-Family ever equivocated about the object of one's spiritual devotion, as Donald did at the

end of a Humane Response Alliance meeting, asking us to keep the Alliance in our own "prayer-- or

meditation or whatever you call it." Evangelicals would not identify much with the sentiment of

"right living over right believing" that motivated the Alliance's "Golden Rule Christianity"

(Ammerman 1997a). Certainty as well as centrality of belief defines the core of modern

evangelicalism: Salvation comes from accepting Jesus Christ as one's Lord and Savior, and living

life in a personal relationship with Christ. This "sense of possessing the Ultimate Truth" (Smith

1998, p. 126) obviates any need to finesse religious references for a prospectively interfaith

audience: Adopt-a-Family volunteers were always "Christians," not "people of faith," and they

belonged to "churches," not "faith communities." Evangelicals, unlike many fundamentalists, court

relationships with the surrounding, non-evangelical world. These are opportunities to spread the

Gospel.

Yet the groups did not proselytize the families. When members of Adopt-a-Family church

groups asked whether or not they should be inviting their families into the Kingdom of the saved,

Evan made clear that groups were "there to help," not to elicit new commitments to Christian faith. I

never heard church group members testify about their Christian faith to family members--the way

pastor Nick did to *me* frequently. Even the most outspokenly evangelistic church volunteer I met

agreed with the dictum that intentional proselytizing was beyond the bounds, though she observed

that in ordinary conversation, one's Christian faith may simply "come out naturally, as you talk."

Adopt-a-Family intended to reach out to people who might not be Christians at all, and might never

become so. To get beyond the received wisdom on evangelical Protestants, we need to listen

carefully to what they say, where.

Vocabularies of relationship

Adopt-a-Family's emphasis on personal relationships distinguished the project from non-

evangelical Christian efforts. Sociologist Christian Smith has summarized helpfully one of the core

characteristics of American evangelicalism: its commitment to what Smith calls the "personal

influence strategy" (1998, see also 2000). Evangelical theology insists that one's salvation depends

on a *personal relationship* with Jesus Christ. For evangelicals, Christ becomes like a close friend, a

confidant, a patient teacher, a co-sufferer, to whom one prays and with whom one rejoices on one's

daily rounds. The self-transforming, heart-changing relationship with Jesus Christ becomes a model

for all relationships. As Smith observes:

"[E]vangelicals see mainline and liberal Protestants as different because evangelicals think

they place too much faith in 'social activism' and political reform as the way to change

society. . .By contrast, evangelicals see themselves as uniquely possessing a distinctively

effective means of social change: working through personal relationships to allow God to

transform human hearts from the inside-out, so that all ensuing social change will be

thorough and long-lasting" (Smith 1998, p. 188).

Seeing each of us through God's eyes, Teri modeled this evangelical ideal of relationship as

she carried out her opening round of personal greetings. From the beginning, the church groups

talked about their mission as one of creating personal relationships. They would "dare to get into the

families' lives." They would "stretch their comfort zones."

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Volunteers used other vocabularies for their relationships with the families, too. Sometimes Evan characterized the church groups as "good neighbors" or "friends" of the families, or as "citizens." When church groups could help ex-welfare receiving families without needing social service agencies, then it would be "citizens helping other citizens." At the end of my time with the project, when one church group leader asked if it was okay to keep her church group going even if Adopt-a-Family folded, Evan smiled warmly and asked rhetorically why he would keep citizens from helping other citizens. Later I will show how volunteers relied increasingly on a vocabulary of "cultural differences" to make sense of their frustrations.

Though Adopt-a-Family volunteers heard and used a variety of idioms of relationship, their personal style of creating those relationships was remarkably consistent. It sounds like Smith's "personal influence strategy," so why not rest content with that? Why bother peering closer into group life? We have to look and listen more closely to understand *how* that strategy works and what makes it difficult to change.

Zeroing in on evangelical culture in interaction

There is no reason to question that evangelicals privilege the reality of the personal, but there are quite different ways to conceptualize that fact, and the differences matter. We can conceptualize it as a personal influence strategy (Smith 1998), a cognitive grid (see Emerson and Smith 2000), or a set of beliefs (Smith 2000, p. 37) that groups use to answer the question of "what should we do". The concept of customs gets us further with my questions about Adopt-a-Family than concepts of belief, interpretive grid, or strategy; the choice of culture concepts here matters here for good empirical reasons.

First, the volunteers had more than one interpretive framework. Field work taught me that the volunteers knew a lot more about the social world than we imply if we say that their interaction was

guided by a personal influence strategy or a belief system. The volunteers kept <u>struggling</u> to fit their

volunteering into a worldview that makes personal relationships the royal route to all meaningful

change. The church volunteers were not ideological dupes blind to social reality; I will show later

that they were not self-conscious proponents of a single ideology at all. It is more accurate to say

that group customs encouraged members to discount or silence their other ways of viewing the

world, than to say they had one interpretive strategy. We need a culture concept that is sensitive to

the ambivalence, that illuminates how the back-and-forth of discussion in Adopt-a-Family groups hit

up against quiet barriers.

Second, notions of a personal influence strategy or belief system do not help us understand

why the evangelical emphasis on personal responsibility and personal power *endures*, even when it

creates frustrations for people like Adopt-a-Family volunteers. Having explored evangelicals'

emphasis on personal relationships with a great deal of insight, Smith arrives at an interesting

puzzle: American evangelical leaders failed to develop

> "a theology and a strategy for social influence that is distinctive, cogent, realistic, and
>
> effective. Instead what we often find are one-dimensional social change assumptions and
>
> practices which promise only limited effectiveness" (1998, p. 192, f. 3).

Smith is criticizing the reductionism--in effect, the lack of a sociological imagination--in a

relationship-centered strategy which holds that changing hearts, one by one, will add up to social

change. The criticism is fair enough on sociological grounds. It implies, though, that evangelical

leaders simply made a strategic mistake. They picked the wrong strategy, the wrong beliefs, and

ought to drop them now for others that work better.

I suggest an alternative: Personal influence is not just a framework of beliefs that astute

evangelicals might drop for a more effective way of viewing the world. It is also is a style of

evangelical *group life*. Built into the customs of groups like those within the Adopt-a-Family

project, personal influence constrains what evangelical groups can do together, who they can be

together. It is a way of creating settings for interaction. Adopt-a-Family volunteers' combination of

insight and awkwardness regarding racial difference suggests to me that the personal influence

strategy was a customary means for keeping their own groups afloat. Changing it would threaten the

togetherness of groups constructed around evangelical Protestantism. It is worth the time to explore

Adopt-a-Family's group customs and see how they shaped the volunteers' way of reaching out.

Building an ark: the customs of servants

A variety of settings constituted Adopt-a-Family.[8]   The customs of the church group which

had "adopted" me were similar to those of the other church group I studied more briefly. Similar

customs informed the large gatherings I observed, too. As in my other groups, I listened closely for

group boundaries, *group bonds*, and the preferred *speech norms*. I listened for evidence of customs

jelling in early Adopt-a-Family meetings, especially in contacts with new or potential participants, at

awkward moments of silence, and in enduring group routines.

Boundaries: trying to build relationships off the social map

From the orientation onward, Adopt-a-Family volunteers got practice imagining the families

outside of a social context. Volunteers talked very little about extended families, neighborhoods,

other churches, local institutions, or county agencies as they pondered how best to serve their

families. The orientation meeting set the tone: Bryan, the county social worker, invited the

volunteers to acknowledge their own confusions, without inviting them to become more familiar

with the world of social service. Did we even know whether welfare reforms had gone into effect or

not? A show of hands confirmed that some people in the room thought the new laws had taken

effect, others thought they had not. "See? We really don't know. It's confusing. It confuses me. . .This is how confusing the system is to be part of." Affirmed in our confusion, we were told that Adopt-a-Family staff would provide all the "technical information" that volunteers needed so they would not need to get tangled up in the complexity. The message was that something else mattered far more than the institutional backdrop.

Bryan might have made the audience's confession of partial ignorance into a teachable moment. In his capacity as a public employee, he might have explained who the relevant agencies and players were. Bryan was speaking as a Christian servant, not a public one, and he located himself and the project on a map that highlighted individual helpers and needy families. In the Community in Christ church group I studied most intensively, I never heard a more elaborate discussion of social welfare services or charities than the sketchy picture Bryan offered at the orientation.

Early in the Community in Christ group's seven month stretch, I did hear volunteers ask for more information about new policies. One volunteer, Kara, found out that Bryan did not know how the new policies might affect Quenora, the mother of the group's adopted family. Two months into the program, the another volunteer, Angie, asked whether she would get some information on paper about welfare reform, because she wanted to know how Quenora would be affected. The group leader, pastor Nick, did not know when, or if, her benefits would end. It did not get clearer than that.

Members of the Community in Christ group went ahead and tried to relate to their adopted family off of any detailed social map. Kara's early responses to Quenora, and the group's response to Kara, illustrate this style of relating: After her first sortie, driving Quenora to a doctor's appointment, Kara offered to take her out for a sno-cone. Kara figured that meant going to an ice cream shop. But instead, Quenora led the two of them down the block to a cart set up right on the street, ice and all.

Pat (lightly ironic): "Entrepreneurial!"

Kara, visibly reliving her discomfort, said this gave her a real sense of the neighborhood. "This is where she lives! This is what she's about! . .My immediate reaction was 'I want to move her out of there!' That's my long-term prayer." Kara spoke slowly, as if trying to comprehend something utterly new, disorienting. "There were bad spirits there. . .We build on land, but we don't think of it spiritually. I saw oppression. . .I saw depression all around."

Pastor Nick: "It sounds like you had some culture shock."

Kara: "It was a culture shock for me."

Kara did not want to learn more about Quenora's neighborhood, or neighborhoods like Quenora's where an informal economy exists alongside conventional marketplaces. Having now found out that such a neighborhood existed, Kara wanted to get Quenora out of there. No one suggested a different response.

Kara was anything but callous. Quenora had a lot of doctor's appointments because she was expecting a baby soon. Kara recounted how during a phone conversation one day, Quenora said she was having abdominal pains. Kara had insisted on driving right over to take Quenora to the doctor's office. Kara interrupted her own story and pondered: "What must it feel like when you're there [having a baby] all by yourself?!" Kara wanted to get into Quenora's life, really feel what she must be feeling. Quenora had told Kara she would have had an abortion if she could have afforded one. Kara said nothing about abortion to Quenora. Theresa, another church group member, said she would simply give her phone number to Quenora on a slip of paper and say "call this when you're having your baby." Kara and other church group members wanted not to be judgmental, even on the signal issue of abortion. It was just that getting into a family's lives did not have to mean getting into their social milieu.

Early on, Keith of the Community in Christ group suggested doing just that. He asked twice at the group's first meeting in August 1997 whether or not Quenora had a social network. "I don't want to assume that she has nothing," he cautioned. Maybe she had friends that she would like to invite to events with the church group. Quenora, it turned out, had a sister just down the street from her—one who was an "adoptee" herself of another church volunteer group. The group was surprised to discover Quenora's sister, sitting with her own church group, a few tables away, at Adopt-a-Family's first potluck. But neither Keith nor the Community in Christ group ever followed up on the insight about networks. I gathered that was not what the group was about.

Adopt-a-Family did map *itself*, if not its families, into a larger world of groups and agencies. It was a simple map, with church groups on one side and social service agencies on the other. At the orientation session, for instance, Bryan had assured the volunteers they could "assess needs" in a compassionate, Christ-like way, not a "social worker way." Pastor Nick of the Community in Christ group made similar comments when the group was deciding to give Quenora clothes for her newborn. "We want to do it as a friendship thing, not 'here's a new kind of welfare.' In his opening prayer that evening, pastor Nick offered thanks to God for the opportunity to be simple servants. "Thank you--that we do not have to have all the answers." Throughout that meeting, Nick was contrasting the group's humble efforts from the heart with "welfare" and bureaucratic expertise. Anyone should be able to tune in to other people's needs. Other members picked up on the boundaries. Kara affirmed at two other meetings that "we're not just another government program. We're really here to build relationships." Evan, the group leaders, and group members alike agreed that their church groups were different from social service personnel because church groups could create warm, personal relationships with families.

Paul Lichterman, *Elusive Togetherness: Church Groups Trying to Bridge America's Divisions*, Chapter 5.
Princeton: Princeton University Press, forthcoming 2005.
PLEASE DO NOT CIRCULATE WITHOUT PERMISSION OF THE AUTHOR
Bonds: "Whatever we do, we do in faith"

Unlike the networkers of HRA, the volunteers in the Adopt-a-Family program were explicit about Christian teachings. Teri's presentation on Christ-like care at the orientation would have made little sense without the assumption that group members related to each other on the basis of a shared commitment to Christ. A volunteer group would not be able to look with God's eyes on ex-welfare families if not all members shared the same, evangelical Christian understanding of God. A good volunteer group member, above all, was one acted with forbearance, and faith in Jesus Christ. When Community in Christ was about to give up on serving its family after seven frustrating months of trying, group's facilitating pastor consoled the group that at least it had tried to act in faith.

Unlike the Park Cluster group in Chapter 6, a good Adopt-a-Family volunteer did not necessarily act *as a member of a congregation*. In Adopt-a-Family, a good, responsible member of the project was one who could practice Christ-like care *as an individual*, driven by individually nurtured faith. A good member, one who would command the most respect, was one who stepped out of his comfort zone to pursue relationships, the way Jesus did when he ministered to poor people and outcasts.

For instance, during our very first conversation, Evan beamed as he told me that one Sherry Peterson was on the board. Why was that good news? Sherry, a street preacher, was someone outspoken about her faith, and someone with enough Christ-like patience and prayerful resolve to have talked a woman off of crack cocaine and gotten the woman started on a new life. Sherry talked openly about how God interceded in her day-to-day plans, once telling her she ought to go to an Adopt-a-Family steering committee instead of staying home. Like Jesus, Sherry could take risks for others. When Evan brought up the risks of working with families from low-income, high-crime neighborhoods at the first steering board meeting in June, he told us that some pastors refused to involve their churches in Adopt-a-Family at all, for fear that volunteers "would just get in with

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drugs." But taking risks like that was part of the project, Evan said. Pauline, a psychologist and

steering committee member, agreed.

"Jesus didn't put himself among *those* people!" she mused ironically. Carla, another favorite

volunteer, similarly excelled at Christian forbearance in the face of risk. He told me he wished he

"had ten volunteers" like Carla, who talked at length about how the Lord was working in her adopted

mother's life, and who refused to get discouraged when the mother unexpectedly left the state.

The volunteers were supposed to relate to each other as Christ-like servants, too, with respect

for an individual volunteer's gifts. If the motive for compassion came from within, then the

volunteers needed to respect each others' individual limits, which only the volunteers could divine

with the help of prayer. Volunteers listened to each other respectfully, trying to draw out each

other's contributions. No one, not even Pastor Nick, posed as a general authority on how to serve a

church group's adopted family. Theresa's off-the-cuff idea to throw Quenora a baby shower, for

instance, became a full-blown plan, and produced a most interesting and awkward evening that I will

describe below. Angie hoped that her skills as a lawyer might make her useful in the group; the

group and Angie decided together that Angie would be the best person to help Quenora navigate the

social service bureaucracy.

Each volunteer would contribute something "from the heart." Groups that highlight

individual contributions can promote a deeply personalized, enduring commitment to a cause

(Lichterman 1996), or they can foster a looser connection of personal convenience that individuals

unhitch when they feel like it (Wuthnow 1994; Bellah et al. 1985). Community in Christ's group

bonds felt closer to the latter. Volunteers were not compelled to attend meetings regularly. They

came when they wanted to, when they felt the call. As Teri told volunteers at the first orientation,

the energy for volunteering with Adopt-a-Family had to come from "overflow." It came from

whatever compassionate goodness people had left over after caring for their own families. These

volunteers did not have to court burn-out to be valuable members of the group. The contrast with

the familiar work-aholic ethic of (underpaid) social service workers was not lost on the woman from

Catholic Social Services, who had come to give the church groups a little savvy advice. After telling

them that the families should make sure to use up their quota of food pantry and shelter visits before

requesting emergency cash, she cracked, "Overflow! Got to get me some of that!"

Speech norms: Discernment

What did Quenora's family need? What does God want us to do? These questions motivated

much of the conversation in the Community in Christ group. Having found my two church groups

very similar, I will focus on Community in Christ. Their meetings were not like the HRA's task-

oriented business meetings, or the Justice Task Force's sounding-off sessions, but more like

contemplation aloud. Every month, the group met to ponder what it could possibly do to help the

family. The topics changed but the theme was always the same. Maybe Quenora needed clothes for

her newborn. Maybe her teenage son Phillipe needed a job: Getting a job would be easier with a

driver's license. Karl offered to ask Phillipe if he would like rides to the Department of Motor

Vehicles. Amusing and horrifying Kara and Theresa, he considered offering to teach Phillipe how to

drive. How come Quenora did not ride buses? Maybe, the group reasoned, Quenora had never

learned how to read, and could not master a bus schedule. Angie said she would ask Quenora

whether she knew how to read, or would like to learn. And so the conversations went.

Discernment meant imagining an individual's needs, in a special way. No one asked if

Phillipe was in high school, if his school had a driver's training program, if he knew how to enroll in

the program, if he had been barred from doing so for some reason. No one asked if Quenora had

health insurance for her baby, if she knew how to apply for the state's health plan for low-income

people. Might the nearest community center have job-placement programs for the son, or adult education programs for Quenora? If needs were individual, unique, then talking about the social context of individual needs would be a disrespectful distraction, the conversational equivalent of telling jokes in the middle of courtroom testimony.

At the end of the group's second monthly meeting, Pastor Nick inadvertently threatened the speech norms that had jelled pretty well by now. He asked the group to take an educational quiz on welfare and poverty—something like the "rat race" quiz in the Justice Task Force, but without the bitter irony. A state agency had sent Evan the quizzes with other information, and Evan dutifully passed them on. The quiz scenario suggested several interesting things about the group, and I will return to them later. For now, the odd silence during and after the quiz, in this very voluble group, said that we had entered uncustomary territory. Contrast the Justice Task Force, where an educational quiz was *intended* to produce conversation, and had them crying out in righteous anger. Customarily in the Community in Christ group, the point of conversation was to figure out how to serve individual needs, and thereby discern God's will for the group—not to decry the social relations of poverty.

Trying to spiral outward

Quenora's baby shower

It was a bold, comfort zone-stretching idea. Some volunteers might not put themselves out so far. Some might have figured that a mother who had wanted to abort her baby did not qualify for a shower. But this was what real, non-judgmental, Christ-like care was all about. As Theresa put it: "The church should be having birthday parties for prostitutes!"[9] The group's idea for a baby shower stretched way beyond the call of conventional volunteer duty. Community in Christ was

going to act on commitments that members had made at the orientation. They were going to create a

relationship.

The spartan, basement meeting space achieved cordial friendliness if not festiveness the night

of the shower. The church building had been converted from an insurance office, and the insurance

agents' desks had left little square craters and gulleys in the beige indoor-outdoor carpeting. Huge,

blue "male" and "female" signs on the restroom doors lent this small church's common space an

incongruously institutional feel. Descending into the uninviting meeting space with lots of

anticipation and a homemade salad, I was happy to see friendly faces. There were long tables with

white plastic table coverings and small centerpieces with autumn themes, a side table featuring the

Jell-o, macaroni, and meat-with-thick-gravy dishes that had become familiar to me from other

church potlucks.

Quenora sat quietly at one table, baby asleep in a car seat next to her. The baby, Adonarius

Victor, had soon become the focus of awkward attention from people who were used to talking

about babies, and clearly needed something to talk about. Does he sleep well? How old is he?

Where did his name come from? I heard people ask about the name at least five times. Quenora

responded in quiet, short answers to them all. Kara and Angie seemed absolutely right when they

said Quenora was difficult to talk to. Some members of the group had met Quenora several times

now, but the conversation still did not come easily. Nick the pastor had been right, too: From now

on, the group would be stepping "outside its comfort zone" all the time.

Opening baby presents did little to loosen up either Quenora or the church group. Quenora

did not initiate conversation, and the questions volleyed her way got tossed back quickly.

Dave: "Adonarius--where is that name from?"

Quenora: "His father gave him the name."

Dave: "What does it mean? Maybe he had an uncle--?"

Quenora: "I don't know--I had another name--"

Tracy: "So I take it you wanted to call him something else."

Quenora: "No, I didn't know what to call him, hadn't thought about it."

Kara and Tracy: "Oh."

Everyone smiled politely, and that was the end of it. The gift umbrella stroller was a conversational goldmine--for the church group. Where is the CD player? Does it have power brakes? Want to go for a drive? To Indigo, one of Quenora's sons: "You want a ride in it?!" It was much easier talking about the stroller than talking to Quenora.

Open-ended relationship-building was hard work. Quenora said little more two months later, during Christmas caroling, or during the Adopt-a-Family program potluck, than she had at the shower. And yet, the group tried to pursue the relationship in good faith. They thanked the Lord in one of their monthly meeting prayers for having sent the group someone who at least had obvious needs to meet.

"Relationships take two"

Six months after beginning the relationship with Quenora, Nick told the group it was time to talk about next steps. They had done different things with Quenora's family in the previous month: Kenneth had met with Quenora's son Pierre a couple of times, but each man had gotten the date of a job-training workshop wrong and missed their planned connection. Kara had toured food pantries with Quenora, until they found out that people could not just go to any pantry they chose. Nick went with Quenora to a toy giveaway at the Lakeburg Sports Arena. Quenora had told Nick she wanted to attend Christmas Eve services at Community in Christ; he thought the communication had been

clear, unambiguous. It was her own idea. Nick had told us several times already that Quenora should not go to services if she thought she was supposed to in order to stay in Adopt-a-Family. Quenora was not home, though, when Nick came to pick her up. He smiled sheepishly: it was just another of those missed connections.

Nick reported something new about Quenora, too. "It turns out that Quenora is not on welfare. She is on SSI [disability income]. So she's not being told she has to get a job. Her motivation is different." Kara agreed that her motivation would be different: "Why would someone want to get off of SSI?" Nick invited the group to share its experiences over the past six months, and discern God's will for the group's relationship with Quenora. It is worth following the conversation closely for what it tells us about the group's challenge in building a bridge to Quenora's family:

Always voluble, Kara started in forthrightly: "The need is not as great as it would be for someone with childcare issues." Quenora was needy, Kara admitted, but catering to Quenora's needs might only make the group into an "enabler."

Kenneth thought that all the group could do now was to give Quenora some options and wait for Quenora to take the initiative to contact the group.

Kara agreed, and some frustration started to show. "When I start a relationship with someone different from me, what I'm really doing is building a friendship—or something deeper. . .But it's been difficult." She enumerated the frustrations. Quenora was not always home when she said she would be. Quenora lived on the other side of town. Quenora was hard to contact.

Kara: "In our community, we're already doing this [trying to help needy people]. I don't know if I can fit in any more . . .Do we have to have Adopt-a-Family to do this? What our family is already doing and will keep doing? We finish one and the Lord brings us another [needy person]."

"My first response when we started this was 'get her out of that neighborhood and over to West

Lakeburg where people are who can help her." Kara was already stretched for time, and Quenora took so much energy just to communicate with that it hardly seemed worth it. What's more, Kara found out something dumb-founding from Quenora's public health nurse. "She told me that Quenora will not take a bus!" Surprised indignation spread around our meeting circle, as if we had just been told of a child who refused to eat birthday cake. "And I thought, 'Now--- that's---an---interesting---concept!'." Kara reasoned that "part of what Adopt-a-Family IS is to help people overcome what really are fears—that's what they are."

Nick: "It is all about relationship-building. Relationships take two." If one side puts out the effort and the other does not, the relationship won't work. Nick mentioned that someone had taken up Theresa's house-cleaning idea and phoned the church with an offer to pay Quenora to clean house.

Kara, almost scolding: "Clean house?? Well, noooo—you have to—Theresa wants—I disagree with her on it, you have to take care of the kids, there are taxes to do at the end of the year."

Angie sounded more sympathetic to the job idea: "Her SSI is going to go down because of welfare reform." Kara tried to be more gracious, but wondered "how will Quenora get there[to a cleaning job] if she doesn't take a bus. Theresa the creative thinker!" She play-acted a dialogue on the topic: "'Well, she can take a bus.' 'Ok, and what if her baby starts to crawl?' 'We'll get her a play pen!'" Kara wasn't convinced.

PL: "I have a naïve question. Maybe I don't understand something about Adopt-a-Family, but if her SSI is being cut, then she is in need in the way that people are who have been on welfare." Nick and Kara said they were not sure whether or not Quenora's rent would go down too when her SSI was cut. They did not know how much her SSI would be cut, and had not asked.

Angie: "Like Paul, I thought 'here's a person in need. So let's help her'."

Nick: "What does the Lord want to have happen? The way we're constituted as a group, it

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takes as much time to talk about it as to simply—just do it." Nick was not sure that more "contrived"

events" would help Quenora in the long-run either. "There have been some good things about being

involved. It's definitely a different neighborhood, and it's stretched us. I've learned some things. "

Nick did not say what he had learned.

And so the conversation continued. What did Quenora need that the group realistically could

provide? Maybe she would like to learn how to read. No one was sure if she knew how; they had

not gotten far enough to ask questions like that. Joking that Angie, the lawyer, was good at asking

hard questions, the group nominated Angie to ask Quenora if she knew how to read. Months of

awkwardness and frustration were taking their toll on the conversation, and the humor darkened.

Angie play-acted a drill of questions, satirizing both lawyerly inquisitiveness and Quenora's

reticence to articulate any needs:

> Angie: "'Do you want more money? You don't? Ok, just asking. How much money do
> you make? Do you want to learn how to read?'"
> Nick quipped that it was best to go to Quenora's apartment with a cell phone because that
> way you could phone up someone inside to let you in. Otherwise you might never get an
> answer at the door.
> Angie: "Yeah, bring a brick. Press your nose up against the window." Garbling words as if
> her nose was smooshed into the glass: "Hello?? Hellowthph?"

After six months, it was still hard getting in the door.

Quenora's needs were not so obvious after all. Adopt-a-Family's version of Christ-like care

required family members to be good at defining needs in private, individual terms that a volunteer

group could meet. As feminist scholars point out (for instance, Fraser 1989), people or institutions

that define what counts as a need can exercise a kind of power over the people with needs. Little of

Quenora's life depended on the church group, so it makes little sense to say the group held a great deal of power over Quenora or her family. Still, Adopt-a-Family's framework positioned the families as subordinates in the relationship—though families had the power to end the relationship, and several did, by leaving town. Volunteers tried to act like servants, not superiors, and clearly were not feeling very powerful in the relationship. Because Quenora's family turned out not to be very good at being helped, the subtle, potential power in the church group's position became more obvious.

Had Quenora been receiving welfare support, the group would have had the logic of welfare reform on its side. Even individuals not good at being helped might feel compelled to accept help as the state-sponsored social safety net was being yanked away. Once pastor Nick learned that Quenora's support from the government was not going to end if she did not find a job, he figured her "motivation was different." The group would not be able to lean on the "push" of welfare reform if its own "pull" proved less than compelling.

It would be very wrong to conclude that Adopt-a-Family groups were nothing but a gloved hand of state domination, easing people into a harsher welfare regime. Families did not need to keep dates with their church groups, accept their support, or even stay in contact with them. But the church groups did have the privilege of designing the protective "ark" for their families. Families could enter or exit at will but could not collaborate with volunteers in redesigning Adopt-a-Family. Having defined themselves as self-less, caring servants, volunteers did not ponder other ways to build relationships besides starting from scratch with sociable events. What might cement relations between strangers from such different social locations? The two church groups I studied rarely gave themselves the space to mull over the challenge.

Shutting down social reflexivity

Keeping the servant's map in place

People with experience in social work, like pastor Nick and Evan himself, kept their social worker's map of the world at bay when they participated in Adopt-a-Family. Their know-how might have helped volunteers reflect on their relationship with their families, but that would challenge the customary group boundaries, as in this example: Jerry, member of the group sponsored by a large, evangelical church in the suburbs, had helped draft some of the provisions of the state's welfare policy reforms. Just like Keith of the Community in Christ group, Jerry challenged Adopt-a-Family's pristinely interpersonal focus by suggesting that families might have social connections worth knowing about. Jerry's comments, like Keith's, got dropped from consideration at a meeting of volunteer group leaders.

Jerry felt ambivalent about Adopt-a-Family's version of relationship-building. He told us sheepishly that his church group had been very slow to contact its adopted family. Another group leader asked if it was difficult for this (white) group to make personal contact with African Americans. Jerry said that that might have played a part in the group's hesitation, but he seemed unsatisfied with this explanation. He added, in a much softer voice, that he had "spent two years learning about community development."

> Jerry: "Coming in as a suburban west side church. . .I have gotten so sensitive to coming in and overpowering her (the mother's) sense of neighborhood."

Jerry felt like he needed to adjust, in other words, to a style of relationship-building that paid little attention to the adopted families' own social map. Kara had felt "culture shock" when she first encountered Quenora's neighborhood; Jerry felt culture shock upon encountering Adopt-a-Family's way of mapping Lakeburg's local world. The program's map needed to stay in place. Evan nodded sympathetically and smiled a tight smile, but seemed little concerned that the church groups were

missing something about the families' social worlds. He said nothing about whether or not the

families' "sense of neighborhood" mattered to his program. No one else took up Jerry's bid to

reflect on who they were in relation to the families, and who the families were in relation to them.

Neither Jerry's group nor the other church groups represented at the meeting challenged the

program's image of relationship-building between isolated families and individual agents of Christ-

like care. Teri had said at the initial orientation that she was not "going to do a cultural thing." The

proscription held. Members tried hard to create relations from scratch, without drawing on the

expertise that project volunteers' might have summoned while wearing other "hats."

Trying to make race disappear, and failing

I kept hearing volunteers mention social differences they ascribed to race. Sometimes they

called them "cultural." Their customs gave them little opportunity to <u>talk through</u> the perplexing

group differences they kept noticing between themselves and their adopted families. Building a

personal, compassionate relationship meant focussing on the family and its needs, without imagining

the church group in that relationship. This was selfless service. Good servants focussed on the

served, not themselves.

The group from Lakeburg Reformed Church enjoyed a picnic with its adopted family. One

of its leaders, Jane, described the picnic at a project leaders' meeting. At first it seemed like she tried

to follow the dictum Teri had laid out at the orientation: Social differences were to be respected

silently, not dwelt upon and discussed. Jane did not tell the rest of us where the group's adopted

family lived, what the mother, Lakisha, did for a living, or where the children went to school. After

telling us quickly that Lakisha's first need was for a driver's license, Jane launched into a description

of the picnic, an event that she took as a test of interracial cooperation:

> Jane: "It was a great experience. Nine white people , and she's a very dark black. And you say you don't notice color—you sure do! . . .It was very relaxed. We all helped set up the table. . ."

Jane told us of how the kids, the church group members' and the family's, all wanted to swim together. Kids and food always helped break the ice, she said. And then she observed some more about color, how striking it was to see a lily-white kid and a very dark black kid in the sandbox playing. "Lighter skin is a status issue in the black community," Jane noted in an authoritative voice, and then commented, "I don't know why I brought that up." No one else seemed to know either. No one took her up on the topic. Jane was brimming with observations about contacts across racial lines, but found little place for them within the conversational confines of servanthood.

Evan originally thought Adopt-a-Family would help Christians cross cultural barriers rather than transcend them altogether, to get to know our neighbors again. He too, though, expressed a lot of ambivalence about differences. Neighbors should be able to be neighbors, without a lot of complicated thinking about their social backgrounds. Sherry, the white street preacher who was such good news for Adopt-a-Family, remarked to Evan and me shortly after the orientation that she wanted to learn more about "racial differences [that] got glossed over." Little gestures like putting one's hand on another's back, she observed, may make an African American "feel like it's a master-slave relation." Sherry sounded like she wanted to learn how to create relationships across differences in social power, not only personal style. Her master-slave metaphor implied that race was an inescapable relationship, one that defined both parties—not that there were two parties which happened to have different race-based styles. Evan appreciated Sherry's point because without knowing how to treat each other properly, making friends with the families would be harder. But he felt impatient with it all.

> Evan: "Race is (pausing, grasping for words)---the dominant---way of talking, and it's not just race. It's not just racial. It's how to be with each other. If I put my hand, (gesturing patting someone's head) an innocent gesture, it gets so complicated!"

Evan's off-the-cuff plaint says something important about the status of social differences in Adopt-a-Family. They were a bother, not an open invitation to understand a wider world. Why couldn't neighbors just be neighbors?

The volunteers did not end up getting more information on how to build relationships across differences in power and culture, though I heard several ask for it. Repeatedly, I heard volunteers worrying about violating cultural boundaries, or puzzling over differences between themselves and the families, or simply observing, like Jane, that the families were different from them. It seemed impossible for the groups to live out Teri's color-blind, Christ-like care.

At one meeting, for instance, Nick told how he and Kenneth had trooped over to Quenora's apartment, but got no answer at the door. A man who turned out to be her brother said that she was not home. Then they tried phoning, but the phone had been disconnected. He imagined what Quenora's neighbors must have been thinking as he and Nick waited outside the apartment. "What were those white guys doing there??" He repeated it several times that evening. Later on, he said that Quenora's baby shower would come off better at the church than at someone's own home; the church would be more comfortable for Quenora's boys than a private space. Kenneth: "The guys would be more at ease, instead of going off with old white guys." Nick repeated, "white guys."

The Community in Christ group defies the assumption, popular among some liberal religious and secular people, that evangelicals must be prejudiced, self-satisfied whites because their faith is conservative. Keenly they felt the frustrations as they tried to build compassionate relationships from scratch. They hit on a way to make sense of it all. Quenora was an exotic other.

<u>Imagining connections: "cultural differences"</u>

Adopt-a-Family put volunteers in close orbit around other people's social worlds without helping volunteers make those worlds less perplexing. In theory, the program's experiences could have helped church group members learn to relate to people different from themselves. That is the social spiral argument. The program guidebook for volunteers that Evan wrote explained that Adopt-a-Family would give the church groups the opportunity to

"Learn about cultural differences i.e. what may be normal for an African- American, Hispanic, or Asian Family, that would not seem normal to a Euro-American and vice versa."
It is hard to learn about differences if people cannot talk about them. Volunteers were learning not to entertain that kind of discussion. In the first two or three months, the Community in Christ group tried hard to discern its family in color-blind terms. But the frustrations with Quenora kept mounting.

Leaders of both church groups I studied developed a short-hand for dealing with perplexing differences that Christ-like care was not bridging. They were "cultural differences." Appealing to cultural differences was like appealing to "interest" in the Justice Task Force. It was a device for satisfying curiosity. It *ended* the conversation.

Pastor Nick introduced the cultural difference trope first. When Kara described her first, harrowing trip to Quenora's neighborhood, pastor Nick had suggested that Kara was experiencing culture shock. Kara agreed, though the cultural difference theme was not yet a regular way of characterizing the relationship. The group was trying hard to discern Quenora as an individual, seeing her through God's eyes as Teri had taught. No one had said anything more about what Kara might learn from the shocking experience, what she might learn about lives like Quenora's. In the

next four months, Nick more and more frequently described their difficulties with Quenora as cross-

cultural challenges.

Families like Quenora's were from a "different culture." Other cultures were like separate

worlds, though Nick implied that "other" cultures could be similar to one another. Nick had spent

seven years as a missionary in Guatemala. The experience became a major reference point for

understanding social differences in general, and other group members were happy to lean on his

wisdom. The baby shower struck Nick as a good idea for Quenora, for instance, because "I know

from Latin America, other cultures, they like to have events, they know how to party." In fact,

"maybe we can do something [at the shower] that crosses both our cultures," he offered.

Nick: "It's not easy to do when we're so different."

Kenneth: "We should just try doing some different things."

Nick replied that banging on a pinata, in Latin America, "is an excuse for just being

together. In our culture, we don't have anything like that."

As long as Quenora was from "another culture," the group would have an easier time

interpreting the frustrations, even if her culture was not Guatemalan. If Quenora seemed

uncommunicative, it was because she was from another culture:

Theresa: "She's shy."

Kara: "The interesting thing is, I can communicate with her."

Angie (sounding dubious): "Did you understand her?"

Nick: "I had trouble too, but being in another culture, I could deal with it."

Six months into the program, building a relationship with Quenora proved to be even more difficult than the group had expected. It was because she was from another culture. Building relationships took two, and sometimes each side put in different kinds of effort.

> Nick: "That's where cultural differences really come in."
>
> Kenneth: "I could try asking Pierre what his needs are, but that would be me asking questions and he giving short answers."
>
> Nick: "That's different cultures again." It was hard enough talking about needs to people "in the same culture," but "talking across cultures" would be much more difficult.

If the group ever sounded mean-spirited about Quenora, it might be because building relationships in a social vacuum must be enough to try anyone's compassion level. For all its sincere effort, the Community in Christ group was teaching members to see beyond the world of differences and inequality, rather than embrace it. If Guatemalans and African Americans were interchangeable "others" on the group's social map, then participation in the group was not helping members build bridges to anyone in particular.

Over a year later, Jane's Lakeside Reformed group was having the same experience as members tried building a relationship across social divides. The Lakeside Reformed group sounded more overtly judgmental about the differences, though, than the Community in Christ group. Jane tried putting her group's relations with Lakisha's family into racial--often meaning "cultural"--terms. Others let Jane's pronouncements stand.

A summer picnic produced a veritable culture clash. Only one of Lakisha's kids was home home when Jane came by to pick them up and drive them to the park. Lakisha and her other kids had gone to see their grandmother at Lakeburg hospital, the daughter at home had said. Jane told the rest of us around the picnic table that she thought she was getting a story. The daughter had

cautioned, "You better not go there because they won't let in people who aren't family." Jane told

us she had never heard of not letting people in who aren't family, and figured the daughter did not

want her to find out that the family was not really there. So Jane called from the gas station , and

found there was no one of Lakisha's family name on the hospital roster. Jane sounded annoyed as

she retold the tale:

> Jane: "It's a cultural difference. . .black people do not have the sense of time." One has to
>
> learn to be on time, Jane observed, for school or a job. But black churches , she observed,
>
> work the same way:
>
> "You go to a service that is supposed to start at nine, and maybe it starts at ten. And then it
>
> lasts all day."
>
> Joan: "Oh, they do that in church TOO??

It was all a matter of cultural differences, she summarized. And those differences come up "when

the church community gets involved with the non-church community, and then when you add

different races--." No one elaborated on the unfinished sentence.

Like the Community in Christ group, Jane's group let the notion of cultural differences do a

lot of work. But Jane's group sounded more sure that some cultural habits were better than others.

Jane did not say black people have a different sense of time—itself a huge generalization. Her

wording implied instead that blacks *lack* a sense of time, that they lack what normal people need in

order to go to school and hold down jobs. The long church service sounded like a big

inconvenience, not an interesting immersion in different worship habits. You "add" different races

in; normal life starts without them. Deep compassion had not made the church group feel much

more like a co-dweller with African Americans in the same society.

A year later, Jane's group was still in contact occasionally with Lakisha's family. The group had taken Lakisha's kids to a Christian-themed puppet show at Lakeside Reformed Church one summer morning, and had them over for a barbecue lunch afterward at two members' home. Relating was still difficult. Chatting alone with Jane, I asked if it would be a good idea for Lakisha to be the host next time. Jane thought Lakisha's apartment was too small and dark, but then told me "if Lakisha came over to my house she would see that our social backgrounds are different. I wouldn't want that to become a factor in the relationship."

It struck me afterward that this was the first time I had heard an Adopt-a-Family volunteer refer so clearly to differences as being intrinsic to the character of the relationship *between* volunteer and family. Jane was implying she had things Lakisha lacked. If Jane opened her own life more to Lakisha, the relationship would be threatened, not deepened:

> Jane: "I think economic differences are the biggest ones. I wouldn't want Lakisha coming over to my house and seeing—we're really different."

Adopt-a-Family volunteers were in a difficult position. The program was predicated on a server-served relationship, in which the two sides ultimately may be moral equals but were clearly not social equals. So to keep the relationships from being threatened, volunteers would try to "know another person's world" as the program guide had put it, while avoiding encounters that confirmed the difference in privilege.

Confronting social inequality directly would violate taboos that many Americans honor, not just evangelical Christian service groups. In a society that fancies itself one of equal opportunity, it is not polite to subject people to situations that only confirm their social inferiority. It is a noble American sentiment: People should be able to relate to other people as equals, shorn of their social markers.[10] The difference between evangelicals and other Americans here is that most other

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Americans have less of a *religious* impetus for trying to develop deeply interpersonal relationships across racial and class lines from scratch. As social servants, Adopt-a-Family volunteers tried to overcome the awkwardness with even stronger, more faithful, Christ-like compassion that would move them outside their comfort zones without moving the served closer to them.

Customs or ideological crusade?

What if Adopt-a-Family volunteers were just trying to coax welfare recipients into a Protestant work ethic? There would be less reason to focus on group-building customs, if we could just as easily explain the project as the outgrowth of a Christian-inspired, individualist ideology that made volunteers think compassion and will-power could overcome poverty. Common sense among some political progressives, and some scholarly analysis (Diamond 1989), has it that conservative Christians promote politically conservative agendas under the guise of religious commitment. Maybe Adopt-a-Family was a just failed crusade to enlist church people as agents of tough love.

Calling Adopt-a-Family "ideological" implies that it was driven by ideas that complement or promote powerful interests. The ideas might be that people on welfare are lazy and undeserving, or that anyone who works hard can succeed in America. The powerful interests would be those behind the legislators' moves to end welfare and shrink the federal government, the big corporate interests which Catherine's social justice task force spent so much time criticizing. In more sophisticated treatments of ideology, people's ideas may be conflicted; people may hold contradictory ideas about welfare reform, the roots of poverty, the need to care. But ideologies, simple or complex, explicit or implicit, end up supporting dominant interests. The reasonable assumption behind studies of ideology is that some ways of seeing the social world are far more congenial to economic and political elites than are others, and the congenial viewpoints circulate more widely and are easier to put into simple language than more threatening viewpoints.[11]

If church members joined the project mainly to promote conservative welfare policies that

burden poor and unemployed people, then focusing on customs only obscures a more basic conflict

of interests between the church groups and the families. But the Community in Christ group's

fascinating response to an educational quiz at one of their earliest meetings showed that they hardly

were invested in welfare reform. They did not sound strongly committed to either conservative or

liberal beliefs about poverty and welfare. Since Adopt-a-Family defined its outreach completely in

terms of welfare reform, it is fair to say the church groups did not question common-sense ideologies

of individual opportunity in the U.S. That by itself does not explain how the church groups

constituted themselves as groups, or why the groups elicited a lot of discussion on some topics but so

little on others.

Evan had received some "poverty quizzes" from a research center, and passed them on to

Nick. The educational quiz was intended to correct common misperceptions of people in poverty--

that they lack ambition or have many children. We took the quiz, and went through each question as

a group; some of us called out our own answers and checked them against the answers printed on the

back of the sheet. On many of the ten questions, at least one member greeted the correct answer

with surprise, and willingness to correct misperceptions: One found she had "overestimated the

compassion of the government" for assuming that welfare payments could support more than two

people; two were surprised that the average number of children in a welfare-receiving family was

only 1.9; several lightly surprised, polite "uh"s greeted the information that earnings, not welfare

payments, food stamps or help from relatives, constituted the biggest source of income for families

with poor children.

It was a remarkably quiet exercise. No one argued with any of the correct answers. No one

sounded invested in the commonsense notions that welfare families have lots of children because

welfare supports them, or that poor people are lazy and depend on handouts. Only one of the ten

answers elicited dialogue at all; members had greeted a few of the other answers with quick, single-sentence commentaries on their own misperceptions. To the one conversation-starter, about the causes of poverty (correct answer: "unemployment/ underemployement"), Sonya said she had heard someone on the radio say that there would be no poverty if everyone simply followed two principles. The principles were "don't quit a job until you have another one," and "don't spend more money than you have coming in." Sonya found the principles puzzling. "That's it? I thought it would be something deeper." Nick said he had heard that sometimes a person who is working gets told that he can make more money on welfare. So the person quits. Nick did not weigh in on whether or not he thought the story represented many people, or whether he thought the story was a comment on working people or government policy, or whether he thought the story was a pernicious myth or a cautionary tale. Kenneth chimed in, that he could imagine someone like that "who is not going to take a job. . .and to some extent understandably so." A person like that "is going to stay home, especially if you have kids to put in daycare. . .it is going to take someone who is committed to it (a job)."

Kenneth's comment could be read as a judgmental stance on people who do not hold jobs. Still, it does not sound like an ideological commitment to welfare reform. This was the longest exchange about poverty, welfare policy, and employment that I heard during my entire seven months with the group. The exchange was striking mostly for its ambivalence, the lack of clarity on where-- if anywhere--people stood on welfare and poverty issues, the seeming lack of a *need* to form political opinions. Of course, political conversation would have stretched if not violated the customary speech genre. It would be mere talk, philosophizing, not caring and discerning. In one of very few explicitly political judgments I had ever heard in the group, the speaker criticized the local school district for denying a boy his need for special attention: The boy suffered the school district's gross failure of *discernment*, in other words.[12]

Interviews with group members confirmed what I had already gleaned from group meetings: Volunteers were not motivated by strong opinions about welfare reform. No one said that supporting the new welfare policies, or shrinking the government, were reasons for being in Community in Christ's group. Of all the people in Adopt-a-Family, only Evan made welfare reform sound like an unambiguously positive thing. Only Evan voiced some ideological investment in the new policies. As he said at a potluck for the church groups and families, "We've wanted welfare reform, now we have it. So what can churches do?" He never defined the "we," and speaking for some undefined constituency, he remarked several other times during my time with the project, "We don't want to go back to the old system." No one else ever commented so forthrightly, or positively, about the new welfare policies. No one, including Evan, ever said "get those lazy people working." No one said "the taxpayers have supported them long enough."

It would be hard to explain all the project's frustrations simply as the inevitable friction of conflicting group interests mystified by ideology. Given the option by county social service workers, the adopted families had all chosen to participate in Adopt-a-Family. None joined against their wishes. By participating in Adopt-a-Family, church group members perpetuated some common-sense, ideological notions about paid work: Supporting ex-welfare recipients' transition to employment presupposed that the transition was worth supporting, that worthwhile jobs awaited family breadwinners, that the main task was to ease the transition, not to question the terms of welfare or employment. These notions are "ideological" because they are easily contestable and they complement powerful political interests. By themselves, though, they would not tell church group members how to organize groups and build relationships with the families. Church group members may have thought in ideological terms, but it takes more than ideology to explain Adopt-a-Family's experiences.

Empowering civil society?

Experts are hard to validate and indispensable too

Sometimes the volunteers thought they needed a professional's assistance after all, even when the customs made professionals or state agencies hard to validate. Outside help seemed appealing, for instance, when volunteers in both church groups I studied needed to talk to the families about making money and learning practical skills. It was awfully awkward otherwise. Community in Christ had been surprised to find out that Quenora was not being supported by welfare payments. They did not know whether or not she could read. Asking would take some gumption, and they had to "nominate" Angie to pop the question. Jane of Lakeside Reformed expressed the same ordinary sense of civility. She told me, unprompted, during a phone chat, "I've never felt comfortable asking people things--you feel like you are prying." She said it was difficult knowing whether the family was really in the state's new time-limited welfare program or not. Fortunately, she observed, Adopt-a-Family had hired Teri, who was not only a deeply religious woman but a professional educator, who "can deal with the families in a different way," and find out more about them.

Jane should have been in an especially good position to find out things about Lakisha. Lakisha happened to attend a work-preparedness class in the same office building where Jane worked. Jane would see Lakisha now and then and had at least brief opportunities to catch up with her. She reported to me on the phone, "Lakisha is working now, and that's kind of good." But she wasn't sure whether it was work that delivered a paycheck, or "training" that did not. "Gee, I should know better than this. I ought to ask Teri about it." It was easier talking to Teri about it than raising the topic with Lakisha herself even though she was close by.

Much as it aimed for compassionate care, neighbor to neighbor, the Adopt-a-Family program ended up getting the church groups into situations that would be easier for a state agency or some

other third party to handle. Neither Christian compassion nor neighborly concern were giving

church group members the sense of social legitimacy that social service workers usually have when

they ask personal questions. That put the volunteers in a terrible, cultural bind, since social workers

represented the coolly bureaucratic alternative to warm, Christ-like care.

Rediscovering conventional volunteering

Called to evaluate Adopt-a-Family after six months, volunteers from different church groups

now had an explicit opportunity to reflect on their families, their families' social conditions, their

relationships with the families. What they talked about mainly were the frustrating logistics and

uncertain prospects of the relationships. They did not investigate the server-served relationship

itself. It turned out other groups shared Community in Christ's and Lakeside Reformed's

experiences. The volunteers converged on the idea that the church groups' relations with families

needed more guide posts, more driving goals, and an outside institution to provide them. They

needed to latch themselves more tightly to state-sponsored social services. The volunteers

converged on this new understanding as they responded to Evan's question about whether the church

groups should be required to make long-term commitments to their families:

Kara: "I walk with women who have major problems. . .ever since I became a Christian."

But working with Quenora had been frustrating. "I first went into this as a relationship person--and

it's been the hardest for me! She's far away. I'm in West Lakeburg, she's on Cannery Lane, it's

fifteen minutes away (tension rising). She has three kids and her--it was the most amazing concept,

them in my car!. . . Maybe we have to get realistic about what we can do--take on specific tasks."

Nick: "Without a clear sense of boundaries there's too many needs. We had ten people for

our group without a clear understanding of what we're supposed to do. . .Maybe a year's commitment

(and no more) is ok!"

Kara was still fascinated with the logistical difficulties: "My kids go to Hilltop AWANAs (evangelical Christian youth groups). I'd have to go 20 minutes, leave at 5:30." It was a daunting scheduling problem to fit Quenora's family into her rounds. "I need to balance my desire to build a relationship with my time."

Evan introduced the possibility of an "action plan," a specific plan that the group and family would share. The plan would be saying "we can work this way to move you further, or care for you," and it would be "deliberate" in "moving" the head of the family toward employment. "The group knows why it's there and how it fits. . .and the people in the [social service] system know." Nick, putting Evan's thoughts together, deduced that "the action plan IS the group's plan. The group knows it's OK to talk about it-- so the action plan needs to be both for the group and the person--sit down and talk, maybe with a social worker." The action plan would codify, from the state's point of view, who the church groups and families were in relation to each other, and in relation to the social service system.

No longer relying on prayerful discernment alone, the groups would talk like administrators, not only like servants. They would be empowered as adjuncts to government-sponsored social services, rather than as autonomous civic actors. The action plan would give Adopt-a-Family groups a new legitimacy. They would be able to talk through relationships that they did not feel right talking about before. They would get that legitimacy though a close alliance with the county, not on their own reputation as caring servants or community advocates.

Evan now introduced the metaphor of "handing off." Social workers would hand off a person or family to some other group outside the social service system. "The case worker has to get involved with us--with the family's permission--and explain to Adopt-a-Family" what the family's circumstances are. A case worker has sixty days, Evan continued, and then leaves the picture. "We can be a continuation of a real relationship. . .with everyone clear-headed about where we can go."

Closing the meeting, Evan told us that he had applied to the county for money to fund a half-time

person to administer Adopt-a-Family.

Suddenly the group was re-casting social servanthood as a "continuation" of a county social

service program, not open-ended caring that comes from a warm place beyond the state and touches

hearts. The group was jettisoning its own boundaries, bonds, and speech norms: Social service

agencies would no longer be distant, morally unsavory entities on the social map. The church

groups would spend more time monitoring plans and evaluating, rather than discerning needs with

God's eyes. It might even matter less for good members to do what they do "in faith"; a good

member might be one who could help make the action plan work. Adopt-a-Family would borrow

much more from the conventional script of volunteering and social work. It would all feel a lot less

like 100 A.D.

Intensely interpersonal relating frustrated Adopt-a-Family volunteers, even as they upheld its

value, and the pain prompted the volunteers to start recasting the program at this meeting. But as

Kara pointed out earlier, the volunteers could practice compassion individually, as good Christians,

without Adopt-a-Family at all. Evan and the volunteers were barreling toward a new vision of the

project that would be much less "Christ-like" in their understanding. No wonder the Community in

Christ group folded a couple of months later. It may be no surprise either that Adopt-a-Family, too,

closed up after three years of working against the conventional grain of volunteering—even though

county workers had supported it, even made it possible. The project's own customs did not allow it

to receive that support in meaningful way.

Adopt-a-Family's protective ark had never really left the safe harbor of the social welfare

system. Group members had learned to see their work as completely separate from the state.

Transcending bureaucratic care had not done anything to lessen the social service bureaucracy's

importance to Adopt-a-Family, even while church groups tried hard to do something different from

"a new kind of welfare." In this case at least, Christ-like care did not threaten the state's freedom

from religion, as some critics of faith-based social service would fear. Instead, the customs of

Christ-like care made it hard for caring servants to discover why their form of care was less

independent than they imagined, and much more frustrating than they would have guessed.

Servanthood meets social reflexivity: A brief comparison

Recall that John Dewey and Jane Addams thought that community life in a democracy

required social reflexivity. Park Cluster's experiences, in the next chapter, add a lot to a positive,

sociological case for social reflexivity. Scenes from the Humane Response Alliance and the Justice

Task Force offered negative cases. Portraying their frustrations with different kinds of bridge-

building, I suggested that a lack of reflexivity might have hindered them. Constrained by their own

customs not to reflect aloud on the relationships they wanted to build, HRA and Task Force

members kept reaching out in self-defeating ways.

Adopt-a-Family's experiences offer a different kind of negative case. Church group members

expressed frustrations colorfully, directly, even bitterly. At the start of the venture, Keith and Jerry

in their own ways had invited volunteers to consider their families' social circumstances; they had

invited social reflexivity. We cannot know whether or not Adopt-a-Family's experiences would

have been more positive had members taken up the two men's ways of thinking about the families,

but the men's approaches made good sense in light of research on low-income families and

community development.[13] Their approaches would have required more reflexivity.

Very briefly I observed another bridging project which brought evangelical churchgoers and

a few Park Cluster members into contact with residents of the low-income, mostly minority Park

neighborhood for free dinners twice a month. The two organizers of the free meals project felt some

of the same frustrations that dogged Adopt-a-Family groups. The project kept running for awhile

after its two leaders sat down to discuss the project's relationship to the people they served. Run by

two women from outside Park neighborhood, the free meals project meets my definition of a

"bridge" in Chapter 2 since the women clearly saw themselves as reaching way beyond their routine

circles, though the twice-monthly free meals constituted an extremely modest sharing of resources at

best. During my brief research stint, the women said they might hand the project over to Park

women—itself a telling conclusion. The project signals something important about the value of

social reflexivity.

     While observing and participating alongside Park Cluster, I kept hearing about "two moms" who

cooked a free meal every other Tuesday and served it to several dozen people at the Park neighborhood

center. When a neighborhood center staff-person first described the two moms' meals to Cluster

members, it was as if the meals appeared out of nowhere. Who cooked them? Were they part of some

larger project? To what church did the moms belong? I wanted to know why they were such a puzzle.

One Tuesday, I helped serve, sat and ate with diners, and interviewed the two moms afterward. They

were members of an evangelical Catholic[14] church some miles from the neighborhood. Their style, I

learned, was like Adopt-a-Family volunteers' in a lot of ways. It invested great religious meaning in

self-sacrificing, compassionate acts.

     The moms told me they felt called, as Christians, to serve people in the Park neighborhood in

some way. They prayed on it, and resolved that since they knew how to cook, they could serve dinners.

As one of the moms, Theresa, put it:

> "I had been praying a lot. . .It's a big part of our Christian faith that we're supposed to love our
>
> brothers and sisters and serve one another. . .HERE is where I needed to serve. I was
>
> overwhelmed with excitement."

Theresa had known that Park was a low-income neighborhood; she did not know much else about it. She opened the phone book and made calls to find out how she might serve this neighborhood that she had not spent time in before. She asked if the owner of an abandoned restaurant near the neighborhood wanted to donate the building so that she could serve meals there. A city official told her there was a neighborhood center in Park. It had not occurred to her to ask. The official directed her to the center's director. Theresa told Charmaine, the director, her idea for serving meals and Charmaine asked if she and her meal-making partner Karla would like to serve them at the center.

Theresa and Karla's free meals project, like Adopt-a-Family, started with prayerful discernment. The two women were planting their own kind of "love dynamite," as Evan put it at his orientation. The women did not mention their church, though they were active in it and Theresa's husband led a bible study group there. In their own understanding, the moms were not coming from a group or an institution so much as from their own, prayerful hearts. Like Adopt-a-Family volunteers, the two women cared and discerned and acted from the heart.

They discovered, though, that they had to develop a more self-conscious relationship to the Park neighborhood if they were going to continue serving individuals at all. After some months of serving bi-weekly hot meals, the two moms "got told ever so politely that while people appreciated our presence, the food was too bland," recounted Karla, of the two moms. Meanwhile, members reported at a Park Cluster meeting that Park residents had criticized this meals project as yet another case of well-meaning white people disempowering African Americans in the guise of serving them. For their own part, Karla and Theresa said that they continued to feel like outsiders, for months after they had started serving their meals. They said they did not feel trusted.

The moms said both they and neighborhood residents felt much more comfortable about the meal effort after they *talked about their relation to the neighborhood* at an open community forum. For the first time, they explained to residents who they were, what they were doing, why they were there.

Theresa recounted that one Park woman had told her, "you need us too, don't you?" Theresa was touched. The woman was right. She had not thought about the relationship quite that way before. Until they had this discussion at the forum, the two moms had no social standing in the neighborhood. They were quizzical if well-intended strangers from outside. Their heartfelt, individual motives by themselves could not identify them meaningfully to Park residents who saw them as powerful outsiders rather than sincere servants.

Why did the two moms dare this discussion, while Adopt-a-Family volunteers mostly did not? The main difference between the two projects, other than the obvious, big difference in scale, was that the two women did not define their meals project in relation to governmental policy, the way Adopt-a-Family groups did. Their social map was different from Adopt-a-Family's. They did not need to fear looking like "a new kind of welfare" or an un-Christ-like adjunct to a bureaucracy. They understood themselves in terms of Christian motives, but did not counterpose Christian servanthood to governmental bureaucracy. Some honest, risky, back-and-forth conversation helped make the two women more welcome to the neighborhood, and made them *feel* more welcome.

Once the women stopped defining the relationship exclusively in their own, albeit well-meaning terms, the relationship was on its way to vanishing: Theresa and Karla told me that, having talked with some Park women about the project, they realized the Park women could plan the meals themselves and season them to local tastes. Neighbors could help serve them, and even take over the whole project. Advocates of community empowerment might only cheer this denouement. Charity imposed from outside may count as a kind of bridge relationship if the charity is accepted and endures over time, but it hardly empowers social self-organization the way neo-Tocquevillians would hope.

There is no reason to assume that social reflexivity must always evaporate the bridges that servant-style groups try to build. Adopt-a-Family volunteers might have found a way to honor Keith's or Jerry's thinking about ex-welfare receiving families, and create bridges that would help the families in

some small way to take more control of their lives, on their own terms. It is an open question. Being

more reflexive would mean changing the customs of social servanthood, but not necessarily as

drastically as Adopt-a-Family groups would have by becoming partners to "action plans" generated by

social workers.

What we learn about evangelicals, and Americans

Maybe Adopt-a-Family did not need to exist. Some proponents of community empowerment see

little good in a service project like Adopt-a-Family, on the notion that local autonomy is good and

service directed toward a locale from outside it is usually bad (McKnight 1995). It is hard to imagine

Justice Task Force members finding much value in the enterprise either. From the social critics' point of

view, Adopt-a-Family offered only to ease victims of injustice into harsher conditions, instead of

criticizing the conditions and their hidden perpetrators. Why reflect on charitable relationships that are

little but a distraction from the real issues?

If there are reasons for dismissing the project, there also are reasons for being more open-

minded. As sociologist Robert Sampson points out (1999), local autonomy and empowerment run up

against serious limits in low-income locales. For better or worse, public agencies and other

organizations outside low-income neighborhoods have resources that neighbors need. In an era when

evangelical Protestants have become prominent in American life, it is important to find out what

contributions they may make to the civic ties that distribute resources to people who want them.

Were they really even trying to create civic ties? Were church group volunteers doing things

together with the families, not just with each other? I argue they were, though cultural blinders may

make it hard to interpret the volunteers that way. Though the church groups assumed their relationships

with the families would unfold largely on the church groups' terms, these relationships still were a kind

of collaboration. The "adopted" families needed to be good at enunciating needs and receiving help

from strangers. Or as the Community in Christ pastor Nick put it, relationships take two. That is true whether or not relationships are egalitarian. Restricting "doing things together" to egalitarian relationships only obscures the variety of ways people create togetherness. It may substitute liberal-progressive biases for a more complete understanding of what civic relationships mean to different people. Researchers are learning that civic life around the world often does not resemble the egalitarian, individual-affirming model prized by intellectuals in the West, and real civic relationships in the U.S. do not necessarily mirror this normative case either. Dismissing the Adopt-a-Family volunteers as ideological enterpreneurs does not help us understand what they were doing.

They tried to do what Jane Addams' charity visitor tried doing. Rather than reflect deeply on their perplexities, though, they opted to bring in powerful outside help. In the process they greatly diminished what made Adopt-a-Family meaningful and compelling to them to begin with. It will take more research to find out what the limits and potentials of servant-style bridging are. It is clear, though, that some of our existing terms of discussion do not clarify this distinctive style of civic engagement.

Adopt-a-Family volunteers were brave to embark on such a demanding version of community service. Some sociological portraits depict volunteers who are un-self consciously condescending towards the people they serve (Liebow 1993; Ostrander 1984). Adopt-a-Family volunteers in contrast, especially the ones from Community in Christ, tried hard to respect their families. Some studies portray volunteers who are clueless about the power that courses through service relationships across class or race divides (Daniels 1988). Adopt-a-Family volunteers, in contrast, took clues but could not do anything with them. If volunteers had a difficult time connecting with their families, the problem was not simply that they scorned the families from the start for being lazy or morally deficient. Neither was it that the volunteers had access only to a single cognitive, theological grid. They were not blind altogether to social differences between the families and themselves. Neither ideologies nor belief systems in the abstract but group-building customs made the difference. The church groups' customs

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bid the volunteers to establish interpersonal relationships from scratch; doing otherwise threatened not just their beliefs but their own constitution as groups. Mutual friendliness proved to be an undependable bridge for relationships across social gaps that volunteers recognized dimly but could not discuss.

Adopt-a-Family's experiences highlight the limits of the social capital concept. Did the church groups have "bridging" social capital? On the one hand, their faith gave them the norms and initial sense of trust to go out and create relationships with people utterly unlike themselves. On the other hand, their style of relating made it hard to build these bridges. After the fact, we could say that Adopt-a-Family groups lacked bridging social capital. That makes it hard to distinguish them from Humane Response Alliance volunteers who also, in hindsight, lacked bridging social capital. The difference in style between the evangelical and mostly mainline Protestant efforts is at least as interesting as the ultimately similar outcomes.

We get farther when we unpack the social capital concept and discover the different customs that help or hinder different kinds of relationships across social divides. The customs of social servanthood encouraged Evan's volunteers to take brave risks that conventional volunteers or networkers would not have considered. In Adopt-a-Family, real connecting, real compassion, *meant* interpersonal, one-to-one relating, and the groups themselves were built around this definition. This is not an exhaustive study of Adopt-a-Family's successes and failures. But the scenarios here make clear that one of its most active groups, Community in Christ, folded because it could not succeed meaningfully with its form of togetherness. Keith's initial suggestions and other secular, social-service knowledge may have helped sustain the group longer, but this kind of knowledge could not have worked *meaningfully* in a group that constituted itself as servants.

Adopt-a-Family's version of compassion may seem extreme, or peculiar to a regional evangelical church culture. Other researchers (Bartkowski and Regis 2003) have found a very similar model of church-based social support though, in Mississippi. Adopt-a-Family's deep

compassion takes to brave limits an ideal that many Americans affirm, an ideal of social solidarity through personal relationships.[15] Many Americans learn in churches, synagogues, schools, or workplaces that a multicultural America becomes more cohesive when members of the majority culture "make friends" with people of color. Adopt-a-Family volunteers tried doing, albeit in distinctively Christian terms, what many Americans would find ideal to try if they had the time and commitment: Many Americans think that deep interpersonal relationships are more "real" than the complex world of social services. They say the personal touch is better than the bureaucratic handshake.[16] Adopt-a-Family's experiences might show what an ideal style of relationship-building would look like in practice.

This is no argument against cultivating friendships across social divides. But experiences like Kara's, Nick's and Jane's show that a more solidary, civic community will not arise from interpersonal good will alone. If anything, intense interpersonal relating heightened these volunteers' sense of their separation from some of their fellow citizens.

Adopt-a-Family represents yet another style of civic engagement that frustrates the social spiral argument. So what if Tocqueville and Tocquevillians have implied that civic groups spiral people outward? Maybe I am holding Adopt-a-Family to the wrong standard. But neither the Justice Task Force nor the Humane Response Alliance made good on the argument either. These projects produced valuable goods. They failed, however, to institute enduring bridges. The next chapter pictures a church-based effort that instituted new relationships across social divides and new public goods. They could do so in part because they dared to talk thoughtfully and self-critically about those relationships.

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[1] One of the churches, Lakeside Reformed, organized two groups, each of which took on a family.

[2] One of the original seven church groups at the orientation disbanded shortly after its family left the region.

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[3] See Amy Sherman's (2000) descriptive overview of faith-based organizations that are providing social services in the new (post-1996) welfare policy environment. See the discussion in Chaves (1999).

[4] Though less well-known than their politically conservative counterparts, evangelical social justice groups have been alive at least since the 1970s. Popular evangelical writer Ron Sider initiated Evangelicals for Social Action in 1973 (See Cochran, 2001). Politically progressive evangelicals were prominent in the Call to Renewal, a network, of roughly 80 local groups throughout the U.S. that promoted a social justice perspective on welfare and poverty, and self-consciously defined itself as an alternative to the Christian Coalition. I studied their Lakeburg affiliate, portrayed in Chapter 7 (see also Emerson and Smith 2000).

[5] Evan often spoke of "the Church in Lakeburg," or simply "the Church," meaning Christians as a collectivity. Other evangelical pastors I met on my rounds with URC projects spoke of "the Body of Christ" with the same meaning. These were normative visions of Christian unity and corporateness; Evan and others invoked them as a kind of ideal for actual colletive efforts by local churches. Their "Church" included believing Christians of all denominational persuasions. Mainline Protestants in this study sometimes resisted being associated closely with evangelicals who used "Christian" in narrow terms to designate someone who practices an evangelical Christianity.

[6] See, for instance, Smith (1998); Wuthnow (1988); Roof (1987); Hunter (1983); Kelley (1972).

[7] See, for instance, Becker (1999); Glock and Stark (1965); Roozen et al. (1984); Troeltsch (1931); Wood (1999, 1994); Wuthnow and Evans (2002); Wuthnow (1999, 1988); but see Mock (1992); Smith (1998); Regnerus and Smith (1998).

[8] There were, first of all, the eight church groups that had volunteered in time for the first orientation. There was Adopt-a-Family's advisory board. The church group leaders also met together three times during my study, once with their group members and adopted families.

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[9] Like other evangelicals I met during this project, Theresa used "the church" to mean Christians in general as a collectivity, not just her own Community in Christ church.

[10] Lamont's comparison of American and French upper-middle class people (1992) and Varenne's ethnographic study of a Wisconsin town (1977) both find Americans believing social status should be irrelevant when people are interacting.

[11] There is little point in summarizing the massive sociological literature on ideology. The briefest overview should suffice: Sociologists' understandings of ideology often take their cue from Marx. But few sociologists now endorse the simplistic readings of Marx that characterize popular, deep-seated ideologies as the product of conspiracies by economic elites to control or dupe "the masses." More subtle treatments emphasize that ideology encompasses common-sense assumptions about the world as well as explicit belief systems (Gramsci 1971; Hall 1977; Hall et al. 1978; Willis 1981); ideologies may be contradictory rather than consistent (Gramsci 1971; Willis 1981; Connell 1983); ideologies are powerful because they shape what we can *say* (and not say) and not just what we *think* privately (Habermas 1987, 1984, 1976; Fraser 1992; Bourdieu 1984; Eliasoph 1998, 1996). My summary characterization of ideology and powerful interests in the main text draws on these insights.

[12] This was at the first monthly meeting. I got a stronger sense of the speech genre after bumbling forth with my own rejoinder to this man. I said something about the organizational politics of schools. Other members just looked at me, with puzzled sympathy. I hadn't gotten the point.

[13] Keith, quoted earlier, had cautioned his church group against assuming that Quenora's family "had nothing," and he wondered aloud about her own social networks. It was a sociologically smart way to think about how low-income people cope with their circumstances. The research literature is large, but see for instance Bourgois (1995), Stack (1974), or Saegert et al. (2001); for the limits of relying only on networks inside a single neighborhood, see Sampson (1999). Jerry, who had

mentioned the families' "sense of neighborhood" at a meeting of group leaders, said he had studied

community development for two years. As he must have found, scholars and practitioners of

community development say that the way to improve low-income individuals' lives is to give them

opportunities to build on their own local assets and steer their own communities rather than making

them clients of outsiders. See for instance McKnight (1995), Sirianni and Friedland (2001).

[14] This is not a typographical error. The women belonged to a church that identified as Catholic, and

evangelical.

[15] See, for instance, Varenne's (1977) observations on how midwestern Americans understood what

connects communities and societies.

[16] Interviews with some 200 middle-class Americans in Bellah et al. (1985) suggest this is just the

case; see also Wuthnow (1991), Varenne (1977).