

## **Beyond the Nuclear Family? Familism and Gender Ideology in Diverse Religious Communities**

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*Religious familism, or ideology about “the good family,” has been central to the culture and practice of local religious communities in the United States. Recent research has suggested that the “Ozzie and Harriet” familism dominant among mainstream religious groups in the 1950s religious expansion has remained formative for many local religious communities in the intervening decades. This research suggests that religious familism shapes how gender is symbolized and enacted in local religious communities and leads to differences in the meaning of religious participation for contemporary men and women. However, this work has been based largely on studies of white, middle-class religious communities. In this article, we analyze the relationship between family ideology and gender in three congregations chosen to exemplify those social locations where we would expect considerable distance from the 1950s “Ozzie and Harriet” ideal—one Hispanic Catholic parish, one African-American congregation in the black Church tradition, and one white liberal Protestant congregation that has adopted an open and affirming stance toward homosexuality and same-sex unions. We find considerable innovation in family-oriented rhetoric and ministry, and a range of gendered practices that prove considerably more inclusive than those found in previous research. We also find considerable symbolic affirmation of the value of more traditional gender roles and practices, particularly in the realm of the family, than we expected to find. We explore the implications of these findings for how we understand the production of gender in local religious communities and for the capacity of local religious communities to become truly gender-inclusive spaces.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The “Ideal Family” is a cultural schema, or a set of interrelated ideas and symbols that are facilitated by configurations of resources (Sewell, 1992). Family ideals shape the available cultural repertoire through which actual men and women talk about, and think about, their own family lives (Bem, 1993; Gillis, 1997). They also influence the possibilities for “doing” family life through their influence on institutional routines that affect the legal and practical range of family-oriented behaviors (Edgell, 2006; Hull, 2006). Family ideals are a primary source of gender ideology because they define and rest upon men’s and women’s essential natures, the relational aspect of gender roles, and the connections between gender, sexuality, and reproduction (Bem, 1993; Smith, 1993). In the United States, religion and family have been intertwined and interdependent institutions and the construction of familism, or morally sanctioned ideals of the family, has been central to local religious life and to official religious discourse (Christiano, 2000; Edgell, 2006; Sherkat and Ellison, 1999).

This study extends scholarship on the relationship between religion, family ideals, and gender using ethnographic data on three urban congregations chosen because of their innovative approach to family ideals, expressed in congregational rhetoric and practice: a Latino Catholic parish, a African-American congregation in the Black Church tradition, and a white liberal Protestant congregation that has adopted an open and affirming stance toward the GLBT community. One congregation rejects heteronormativity, and two draw on a culturally available and legitimate extended family ideal; both approaches are innovative in a context in which the heterosexual nuclear family with children is deeply entrenched historically and institutionally (Bendroth, 1993, 2002; Christiano, 2000; Ebaugh and Chafetz, 2000; Edgell, 2006).

We approached this study with several interrelated research questions. How *widely* and *thoroughly* are innovative family models institutionalized within the rhetoric and practice of these three congregations? What are the implications for how these three congregations become gendered social spaces? Would we find a wider range of family ideals and gender ideologies than found by previous research on local religious communities? If so, what are the implications for the way we understand the available cultural repertoire of family and gender ideals that are produced within and through religious communities, and their capacity to embody both dominant and alternative understandings of gender?

We believe that the institutions of family, religion, and gender intersect in ways that can be mutually reinforcing or contradictory (Martin,

2004), so that religious familism sheds light on the social construction of gender. This may be particularly true in a postfeminist era in which explicitly patriarchal rhetoric is either sanctioned or cast within a religious framework that emphasizes nurturing, egalitarian relationships *in practice* (Gallagher and Smith, 1999). And it is true also because family ideals often provide the template for understanding the public and private nature of gender roles and making claims on public resources (Cott, 2002; Eichler, 1997; Hareven, 1991; Lakoff, 1996).

### FAMILY IDEALS, GENDER, AND RELIGION

Smith (1993) argues that the dominant family ideal in the United States is the Standard North American Family (SNAF), which is a nuclear family comprised of a married male–female couple oriented toward the bearing and raising of children. This family ideal is pervasive in popular culture, legitimated by religious leaders and other moral and philosophical spokespersons, and facilitated through a wide range of institutional, legal, and economic arrangements. It places gender and sexuality at the heart of family ideology, being both heteronormative and dependent on a gendered division of labor oriented around reproduction. It is also based on a white, middle-class cultural orientation and is easier to achieve with a middle-class income (Meyerowitz, 1994).

While Smith's term (SNAF) serves as a useful shorthand for much of what makes the American family understandable as such, there is in fact some variation in the form that the SNAF has taken over the course of history (Hareven, 1991; Skolnick, 1991; Stacey, 1991). In this view, there are two main family ideals in the contemporary U.S. context, both variations on the SNAF family: the "nurturing" family ideal in which men's and women's natures and roles are essentially similar, marriage is companionate, and individual self-expression and mutual satisfaction are highly prized; and the "traditional" family which reproduces an understanding of men and women as fundamentally different in nature, with complementary roles organized around child-bearing, -rearing, and financial provision, and in which duty is a key component of commitment (Lakoff, 1996).

What makes the two family ideals different is the degree to which they rely on and reproduce traditional understandings of gender. The traditional family ideal is based on androcentrism, gender polarization, and biological essentialism (Bem, 1993). The nurturing family rejects these traditional gender traits and is more open, at least in theory, to being "stretched" to accommodate a range of gender roles and sexual orientations. Lakoff (1996) argues that the "culture war" is fought over the

differences in gender ideology that these two family ideals presuppose, which have public, as well as private, ramifications (cf. Bellah *et al.*, 1991; Eichler, 1997; Hunter 1991).

Historically, religious institutions in the United States have been centrally concerned with the production of familism, or ideals of family life (Christiano, 2000; Edgell, 2006). Religious familism has idealized certain forms and functions of the family, defining them as legitimate, valuable, and morally correct, even essential for a healthy social order (Bellah *et al.*, 1991; Bendroth, 2002; Christiano, 2000; Cott, 2002). Mainstream religious institutions in the United States have promoted the SNAF model, emphasizing the importance of stable, monogamous, heterosexual marriages which produce children; supporting parental authority; and discouraging premarital and extramarital sex (Sherkat and Ellison, 1999). Religious institutions have contributed to what some have called “the marriage culture,” and to the idea that being an unmarried adult, deciding to remain childless, or living in a same-sex union are at best unfortunate states in which to find oneself, and at worst irresponsible, deviant, or immoral choices which should be sanctioned.

For much of American history, religious institutions have promoted ideologies that interpret men’s and women’s natures as fundamentally different, and they have encouraged the development of various versions of the ideology of separate spheres, with male activity concentrated in the realm of work and civic life (defined as public) and women’s activity concentrated in the home and church (defined as private) (Bendroth, 1993, 2002; Christiano, 2000; Cott, 2002; Sherkat and Ellison, 1999). Many mainstream religious groups today endorse various forms of traditionally gendered family roles; taken together, conservative Protestant groups alone comprise about one-third of American church-goers, and many Catholic parishes also endorse traditional understandings of gender (Ecklund, 2003; Gallagher, 2003; Gallagher and Smith, 1999; Woodberry and Smith, 1998).

Edgell (2006) argues that the 1950s was a formative period that still shapes religious familism today among mainstream religious groups (cf. Bendroth, 2002). In a period of rapid institutional expansion, organized primarily around church-planting and church-growth in the booming post-war suburbs, a template of ministry was developed around the “Ozzie and Harriet” ideal. Facilitated and legitimated by a wide range of institutional and spatial arrangements, from retail and professional establishments who kept 9 to 5 hours to the explosion of suburban enclaves, this family ideal has shown remarkable vitality and persistence despite never encompassing the reality of many, some have argued most, American’s lives (Coontz, 1992). The historical irony, of course, was that religious institutions

developed a template for ministry in a decade that turned out to be an historical exception and around a family form that soon peaked and then rapidly declined.

The cultural ideal and the institutional routines of ministry organized around it have proved, Edgell (2006) argues, remarkably persistent. In an extensive study of over 100 congregations in four communities in Upstate New York, Edgell (2006) found that *most* congregations, liberal *and* conservative, operate with a “stretched” version of the Ozzie and Harriet family ideal, or the SNAF as described by Smith (1993). However, Edgell (2006) also found a few innovative congregations do have a more progressive, egalitarian understanding of men’s and women’s natures and roles, which proved far more open to same-sex families (Edgell, 2006; Smith, 1993). While comprising about 15% of the congregations in these four communities, innovators drew 40% of the church-going population on any given Sunday.

Edgell (2006) also found that the family ideals institutionalized in local religious life had a powerful influence on how local congregations became gendered spaces. Many of the congregations with a neo-patriarchal, “stretched” version of the Ozzie and Harriet family ideal nevertheless incorporated some egalitarian images and rhetoric on women’s roles, and were affirming of dual-earner families. The innovator congregations went farther, displacing “the family” from the center of congregational symbolism and rhetoric and de-centering gender as a basis for congregational participation. Edgell (2006) also found that men and women in these communities were both aware of and responded to the gender messages in local religious life and that the women, in particular, were active seekers for religious communities that affirmed their own understandings of gender and family. Edgell’s (2006) study was profoundly shaped by the communities she chose to study, which were 94% white and were oriented toward rural, small town, and small urban environments. In particular, she noted that the religious institutions in these communities were pervaded by a set of white, middle-class assumptions about family life that shaped not only their approach to gender and sexuality but more generally limited their understanding of what family life is like and what constitutes a “family-oriented” ministry.

Would there be more variation in family ideals in communities in which the SNAF model exists in tension with or in combination with other family ideals? In such communities, would we also find a different understanding of men’s and women’s natures, the importance of gender as an organizing principle of local religious life, and the links between gender, sexuality, and reproduction in the family? We set out to answer these questions, drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in three congregations

focusing on the construction of family ideals and gender ideology in religious communities where the “Ozzie and Harriet” ideal is a particularly poor fit.

### CHOOSING EXEMPLARY CONGREGATIONS

In the fall of 2004, the lead author drew upon contacts with three local ecumenical organizations and a network of informal contacts among local religious leaders to generate lists of congregations known for either “innovative family ministry” or “an innovative approach to family.” A research assistant began calling congregations on the list until he was able to designate two congregations with mostly white membership, two with mostly Hispanic membership, and two with mostly African-American membership, all of which had leaders who described their own approach to ministry as “innovative” or “experimental,” and all of which had several of the features described in Edgell (2006) as belonging to innovator congregations: an openness to cross-racial alliances and a leadership involved more broadly in community-based activism on issues of racial or economic justice; day care or child care for members; a range of programming in addition to the “standard package” of Sunday School, Youth Group, and a Women’s group; openness to lesbian or gay members or same-sex couples; a leadership willing to affirm the statement that “There have been all kinds of families throughout history, and God approves of many kinds of families.”

From this initial list, three congregations were selected either on the basis of their explicit theological commitment to a progressive and egalitarian understanding of the family or because their membership is drawn from communities where the SNAF (Smith, 1993) does not reflect the lived experience of the families that worship there. The Liberal Protestant congregation rejects heteronormativity and has a stated commitment to feminism as part of its larger social justice commitments. In both the Latino and African-American congregations, many of the families do not fit the social class profile that makes the SNAF feasible, and both draw on populations in which there is a more extended-family or kinship model that is culturally available and often preferred.

Our activities included both participant observation and in-depth interviews. Although interview questions were scripted, respondents were probed using open-ended techniques, and many interviews became open conversations in which questions already covered were not explicitly asked. Interview subjects were sampled from a wide range of family contexts: married with children, married with no children, divorced, blended

families, “empty nesters,” cohabiting, single living alone, etc. Church activities for participant observation were selected because many were specifically defined as “family events.” Interviewees were selected at the levels of both membership and leadership. All references to congregations and their members are pseudonyms.

At Wharton African Methodist Episcopal, we conducted five interviews with women and six interviews with men and attended a Sunday service (led with the help of children from the congregation), a women’s bible study, a men’s bible study (a male fieldworker, Eric Tranby, assisted us here), and a “Families Together Today” meeting. At Harmony Church, we conducted 10 interviews with women and three interviews with men and attended a church council meeting, various Sunday services, a “Peace with Justice” potluck, a women’s brunch, a children’s art exhibition, and an adult spiritual education class. At Holy Spirit Parish, we conducted 11 interviews with women and five interviews with men and attended a Spanish-language Mass, a faith formation class for Spanish-speaking adults, a faith-formation class for Spanish-speaking children, a social gathering for Anglo retirees, an integrated celebration for families, daily activities at the drop-in social services center for Spanish-speaking parishioners and community members, and an integrated family supper and gospel discussion. Erika Busse, a native Spanish-speaking fieldworker, assisted us with our activities at the Catholic parish.

### **Wharton African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church**

Wharton AME is an African Methodist Episcopal congregation; the membership is almost entirely African-American, with the exception of a small handful of mixed-race families. Formal membership to the congregation numbers around 600, and head pastor Reverend Roberts estimates that about half show up to Sunday services. Wharton now has a rapidly increasing membership, which has picked up momentum in the last 7 years. The age range at Wharton is by far the most diverse of the three congregations, as members range from infants to elders—although there are more aged folks than youthful members, and twenty-somethings are hard to find. Wharton’s eldest member estimates the founding of the church as sometime in the late 1950s or early 1940s.

The church itself is situated on the outer edge of a large, newer mixed-income housing project designed to integrate poor and middle-class residents. By prohibiting porch and lawn gatherings, outdoor car repairs, and various other collective uses of public space, the management of the housing project has hoped to keep the crime rate down and the

quasi-suburban esthetics of the neighborhood intact. The membership at Wharton ranges from struggling working class to upper-middle class, with the majority of the membership being working class or living uncomfortably close to the poverty line.

*Family Practices* Reverend Roberts emphasized the importance of the extended family to Wharton members, as many have close personal contact with relatives outside the circle of the immediate family. For example, encounters with congregants revealed that a handful of children had been raised or were being raised by family members other than their biological parents. "Family," at Wharton, is often expanded to include grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins, both out of necessity and because it is unquestioningly accepted that this is the way "family" is done. Observation at a Sunday service, however, made it very difficult to discern family formations, as children generally sat with the children's choir, many of the men stood in a ring around the outside aisles as ushers, and older women sat in the front rows as deaconesses.

There are a sizeable number of young people who take part in Wharton's youth program offerings, which range from tutoring workshops, to college preparatory classes, to youth choir, to "children's church." Within the African Methodist Episcopal Church, "Christian Commissions," organized around matters such as education, health, social welfare, etc., oversee the development of new programs through a process of inquiry about possible benefit to the church, individual members, and the surrounding community. Another way in which new programs are developed at Wharton is through member suggestion, by which members are expected to take partial "ownership" of and responsibility for initial implementation and institutionalization. One such program is "Families Together Today," which posed one specific reason we expected to find a particularly inclusive definition of "family" at Wharton.

Families Together Today (FTT) grew out of the family needs of a group of five men who began meeting monthly in 1982 to provide each other with support and encouragement in raising their families. In particular, the founder of FTT found himself in need of support when his parents' death left him raising his younger brother. In order to exploit the existing social connections among members at Wharton church, the founder of the organization began a group there. At the outset, one core family was chosen to lead four others in creating a similar network of mutual support. In 1996, the gentleman who drew the first group of five men together decided to extend his organizational model to include other networks of families in other locations. The model used in the original FTT



is now being implemented in three other Twin Cities area congregations, and there are plans for future expansion. Membership in the FTT is a lifetime commitment, and although only five families at Wharton are involved in the program, those five families are quite prominent in the church community through their leadership roles in the church. Those who are participants in FTT form very close personal relationships, which in turn seems to have a direct impact on the atmosphere at Wharton. Although the majority of the families participating in FTT are nuclear in their organization, it is worth noting that the members of FTT are also of a considerably higher socioeconomic status than the majority of Wharton congregants. In general, however, the actual practices at Wharton suggested that the extended family model was the dominant family formation.

*Family Model: Rhetoric* When asked about the types of families at Wharton, Reverend Roberts emphasized that Wharton is “more diverse” in that regard, as there are all kinds of family arrangements within the body of the congregation. Roberts insisted that blended families, single-parent families, young couples, and empty nesters can all be found at Wharton, and interview data and visits to Sunday services confirmed his assertion. Although they do use the language of “family ministry” at Wharton, Roberts was quick to reassure that they are very “careful not to leave anyone out.” A “strong” family, or a “good” family, for Wharton members, is one that is actively involved with the church, lives according to scripture, has a loving father at the head of the household, and takes their relationship with God very seriously. When asked about “family values,” Roberts explained that at Wharton they do base their family values “on the biblical side of things,” but quickly cut himself off so as not to get “too controversial.”

The FTT program sets the tone for much of the family-oriented rhetoric in the congregation, as its mission statement was echoed in similar sounding comments from many members: “Our mission is to implement a functional family model to develop successful children and youth by creating values driven, covenant-based, extended family relationships to support immediate families in nurturing and rearing their children.” Adult participants voice a considerable amount of anxiety about raising children in “today’s world,” which they insist is made more difficult largely because of the increasing lack of influence of the church on youth and the difficulties families face in staying together.

Two of the most prominent themes in the Wharton interviews (with both FTT and non-FTT members) were concerns over raising children and paternal authority. As mentioned above, congregants tended to dwell

on the increasing difficulty of raising children in the world today, and cited a variety of reasons for the increasing prevalence of this trend: American families are moving away from God and the church, youth lack strong role models (especially male), the extended family form is disintegrating, family members are experiencing increasing geographic mobility, and children are no longer allowed to pray in public schools. Although there were some loosely coded references to the challenges feminism and homosexuality pose to the authority of the patriarchal, heterosexual family, it was often difficult to tease such responses out, perhaps because of the assumed interviewer identity as a young, liberal, university-educated feminist. In addition, many of the male respondents we spoke to at Wharton mentioned their frustration at the state's undermining of their parental authority in situations where a father's discipline is perhaps more harsh than the state deems necessary (spankings, etc.). In such instances, children are taken from their parents and placed in foster homes, which is undesirable because fathers mean no harm and are just trying to "raise their children up right." None of the situations our respondents described to us were seen as potentially genuinely abusive, but instead were narrated as part of what it takes to be a caring, involved, and strong father, which sometimes required the use of physical discipline.

Ultimately, although there was obvious encouragement of extended family arrangements at Wharton, single-parent homes and female headship were still very much stigmatized. Although one respondent went so far as to describe single-parent homes as "dysfunctional," most instead opted to relate that there "is something missing there," and that children will undoubtedly suffer for it. Aside from concerns mentioned above regarding assumed interviewer status as feminist and politically progressive, the extent to which the stigma of single-parent homes was also potentially altered due to processes of racial self-censorship should also be considered, due to the potential dynamics between white interviewers and African-American respondents. Single parenthood, and perhaps fatherhood, would likely have been described very differently to someone with racial "insider" status. Given the emphasis on child-rearing, the valuation of bonds among family members extending beyond the nuclear unit, and the stigmatization of single parenthood, we argue that the extended family model, the SNAF, and the nuclear family model were all circulating cultural models for family in the rhetoric of Wharton congregants.

*Gender* Messages about gender at Wharton include a powerful mix of androcentrism, polarization, and essentialism. Men's and women's roles as "husband," "wife," "father," and "mother" were frequent topics of

discussion at Wharton, insofar as respondents repeatedly emphasized that it is the man's responsibility to be the spiritual and financial head of the household, the woman's job to accept and respect that, and the job of both to know their spiritually mandated, opposite, respective role and adhere to it so as to ensure that the family will remain together. A primary cause of family dissolution, according to Wharton respondents, is the inability of family members to adhere to their familial roles as "husband," "wife," "father," "mother," "daughter," or "son."

Family situations in which women are the primary providers, and men take on more of the child-rearing duties, are poorly received by many members of the Wharton community. This finding was confirmed by both male and female ethnographers. The model of the "good family" held up by many Wharton members placed the husband/male provider firmly in a position of bread-winning and spiritual authority over the rest of the household, and deviation from this was seen as unnatural and destructive. Although single parents made no mention of feeling as though they had been treated as lesser because of their family status, it was clear from the interviews that their living arrangements were seen as undesirable by the community. Cohabiting relationships were greatly frowned upon by the community and the pastor and several respondents proudly told me about the couples within the congregation that had been persuaded to marry by constant efforts on behalf of the leadership and laity alike. Despite the positive aspects of marriage (especially with regard to the involvement of children), there was no critique of the potentially negative aspects of rushed marriage.

In combination, the pro-marriage culture, the premium placed on male headship, and the stigma surrounding single parenthood reinscribed SNAF and largely undercut the progressive potential of the extended family model. However, the profoundly meaningful relationships developed between children and nonrelated adults in this congregation, and the presence of strong and emotionally available male role models, provided both a more expansive script for family and masculinity than might otherwise be available. Overall, Wharton is an ambivalent and internally contradictory place with regard to family and gender.

### **Harmony Church: A Liberal Protestant Congregation**

Harmony is a liberal/radical, almost completely white, socioeconomically diverse Protestant congregation. Harmony's pastor, Reverend Smith, described his congregation as full of "aging hippie-types" and "very liberal, and very unique." Those who come to Harmony for services travel

from all over the metro area, and some come from the surrounding neighborhood. Although Harmony's official membership is around 150 individuals, many members choose not to affiliate due to the parent denomination's official position on prohibiting GLBT persons from holding leadership positions. Those actively participating are estimated somewhere around 200, and an average Sunday service will draw anywhere 40–60 attendees. A unique feature at Harmony is the visible amount of self-identified Buddhists, Jews, agnostics, and “pagans.” The question of how Harmony can function “within but not of the Christian church” has often become the subject of heated debate, as has the use of the Christian bible in Sunday services. There is also socioeconomic diversity; while some members are middle-class professionals, some congregants receive public assistance, and a few are also under/unemployed. There are quite a few blended, divorced, single-parent and childless families at Harmony, and many people attend services alone. The traditional nuclear family is in the minority in this congregation, and even most of those who are part of such families do not participate as a family, but individually.

The mission statement of Harmony is very telling of the community, because all members can readily recite it and believe themselves to live it through both word and deed: “To nurture spirituality, build caring community, and work courageously for peace with justice.” Harmony has a long history of association with antiwar and other liberal activist social justice concerns (e.g., the Sanctuary Movement of the 1980s) dating back to the late 1960s, but the congregation underwent a radical transformation in the 1970s when the views of Harmony's newly assigned liberal activist pastor drove many of the more moderate, aging members from the church. Moderate members were quickly replaced with a more radical membership, and Harmony remains a haven for those who have suffered from “spiritual abuse” and endured the ills of “traditional theological dogma.”

Reverend Smith explained that the Harmony community often finds itself in a “love–hate” conflict with the larger authoritative church body because of their radical practices and beliefs. The congregation generally keeps the good favor of church authorities because they are recognized as an “innovator” in their approach to urban ministry in a diverse context. Although the greater leadership is often opposed to their liberal-activist tendencies, the church authorities still recognize that Harmony is doing what Smith described as “cutting edge things that we need to learn how to do in this postmodern age.”

*Family Practices*      Explicitly labeled family programming at Harmony is in somewhat short supply, save for a summer camping retreat and the

various Sunday school events that try to involve the adult members of the community. Indeed, many of the families with children that have come to Harmony throughout the years have eventually left because of the lack of family and child-oriented programs. However, at the urging of couples with children, the Sunday school program was recently revitalized (Harmony had no Sunday school for many years). Although the overburdened Sunday school director also doubles as the outreach director and grant writer for the congregation, more and more families with children have begun coming to the services more regularly and participating more actively in the life of the congregation due to these increased efforts. In the 5 months we spent following Harmony, the presence of children in the pews and at community gatherings grew noticeably. Additional programming at Harmony includes a men's and women's group, an adult religious education group, peer counseling, youth restorative justice, and direct assistance/advocacy for struggling families and individuals in the neighborhood. There are no specific programs for single parents, singles, blended families, or widows/widowers, but Smith insisted that there are plenty of opportunities for all to get involved in the life of the congregation "on an individual basis." Areas for continued improvement, according to Smith, are the Sunday school and youth ministry in general, as investing in those areas will hopefully ensure the survival of the congregation.

Most of our respondents felt that Harmony tends to best serve singles and "old hippies," and acknowledged that perhaps the most neglected group is families with children. At the same time, many were enthused and optimistic about Harmony's new efforts to serve this group. Some offered the example of one young mother who helped initiate the Sunday school revitalization efforts and took the matter to the church council when she felt her needs for religious instruction for her young son were not being addressed. During an interview with this woman, however, she intimated that she often feels lonely at Harmony because she is pretty much the only mother of a young child who actively attends and participates. It was therefore not difficult to imagine how it might be difficult for parents of young children, as so many of the activities at Harmony are structured around the model of individual, adult participation.

*Family Rhetoric* When asked to define a "family," Smith quickly explained that any group that considered itself a family would indeed be a family, as "family" is a subject best left to self-definition. Smith mentioned that people at Harmony would probably be very uncomfortable with the "language of traditional familism," and most of the congregation sees the whole talk of "family values" as largely homophobic and heterosexist.

Many of the members of Harmony church have experienced some form of family disruption (divorce, separation, death of a loved one, remarriage, etc.). Harmony's website identifies the congregation as "inclusive," "feminist," "reconciling," and welcoming to the "differently abled." For the most part, Smith explained, they would not really speak of "family ministry" at Harmony, and "family" would be used only as a neutral descriptor for activities. However, we did not even encounter the use of "family" used in the latter context, and "family" was a point around which there was an unusual and unsettling silence at Harmony church.

What is perhaps most prominently unique at Harmony is the congregation's "reconciling" identity, meaning that it is explicitly named as a congregation that is welcoming to GLBT persons. The congregation voted unanimously to become a reconciling congregation 16 years ago, and renewed that pledge about 2 years ago. Stories told by members about this history indicate that there was no opposition to the idea of becoming a reconciling congregation whatsoever. Heterosexual members explain that they feel Harmony is a good environment for GLBT folks because they are "open and affirming," and GLBT members generally echo the same sentiment (although some have their reservations and frustrations about constantly having to educate heterosexual members by explaining their perspective for the group). Although programming for the GLBT community at Harmony had been offered in the past, there were no such events scheduled during our time at Harmony. The lesbian couple we interviewed was looking for new "church homes," expressing their distaste for Harmony members' sporadic and "transient" attendance of services and activities. The two most prominent gay men in the congregation attended services only sporadically. We later learned that GLBT membership had dwindled both because of the ongoing battle with the larger denomination about GLBT persons assuming leadership roles and also because of a linguistic blunder on the part of the pastor in which he referred to marriage as a sacred pact between a man and a woman. Although a public apology was later issued, many were dissatisfied that apologies were not distributed in a more personal manner, and departed from the church as a result.

Although Docka had initially attributed the lack of "family talk" to the lack of "traditional" families at Harmony, we soon came to understand that the reasons behind the silence were much more complicated. Heterosexual members expressed the concern that talk about "the family" would alienate some of the congregation's GLBT members. One GLBT couple mentioned that, although an increased focus on family issues might be beneficial, they also thought it was possible that an increased focus on family issues could perhaps bring more narrow and undesirable definitions of family to the fore. Also, because of Harmony congregants' associations

of “family talk” with conservatism and right-wing Christianity, family rhetoric took on an associative quality with the “*status quo*” or “the establishment.” Although initially what we found was a total lack of dialogue on the family, we were later informed in an interview with a female member that Reverend Smith had previously given sermons on the matter of “family values” once or twice before, early in his tenure with the church. The substance of one particular sermon, delivered directly after the reelection of President George W. Bush, dealt with the recognition that liberals have family values that are just as legitimate and strongly felt as conservative family values. There were no other instances, however, in which the subject of “family” was discussed—either in sermon, or within the setting of church activities or informal conversation. Although many of the congregants we interviewed mentioned an interest in more family activities and programming, they were fearful that some might begin to feel excluded if the language of “family” became more widespread at Harmony. In order to avoid a potentially divisive matter, the issue had been deemed taboo and outside the realm of appropriate dialogue.

Instead, language and talk about “community” were often invoked in contexts where one might otherwise expect mention of the family, and therefore seemed to be the result of the congregation’s effort to substitute for the absence of language of “family.” Creating “caring community” is one of the three pieces to the mission statement, and when people would mention “the community” at Harmony, they would often explain that the congregation is “just like a family.” In defining the “ideal family,” most respondents were quick to stipulate that a “family” can take many forms, but must have open communication, economic stability, and love in order to be strong. In many responses, interviewees would often indirectly reference the nuclear family form, although many of these same respondents were explicitly critical of the nuclear arrangement, calling it “isolated,” “lonely,” and even “selfish.”

Ultimately, however, the neglect on the part of the majority of the Harmony community to explicitly address “families”—especially families with children—drove many families away from the church. The absence of discourse on the family at Harmony often made it difficult for people to explicitly address just what their “family values” really are, beyond the value of utmost inclusiveness and aversion to the religious right’s definition of family. Harmony’s focus on the individual and “the community,” and their inattention to parent–child units arguably left them ill-equipped to engage the question of family in a substantive fashion. Because of the abandonment of the category of “family,” Harmony became a place where talk of “family” became inappropriate. Although Harmony’s blank discursive space had frustrated some to the point of exit, the environment

there provides the possibility for a unique and potentially powerful arena to take on cultural ideals of “the family” (and by extension, cultural scripts for masculinity and femininity), extending an opportunity for redefinition and empowerment.

*Gender* Both male and female congregants at Harmony Church were critical of nuclear family arrangements for a number of reasons—not only did such arrangements imply limited adult resources for children, but they were also burdensome for the woman in the family, as she generally would be expected to hold a career in addition to assuming the responsibility for the majority of the housework. Many of the female respondents at Harmony mentioned leaving such marital arrangements because they felt overburdened, trapped, or “invisible,” either to remarry into more companionate-style arrangements with men, to pursue relations with the same sex, or to refashion their lives in such a manner that an ongoing sexual relationship no longer took center stage. A great deal of both the women and the men at Harmony identified themselves as “feminist,” and many of the female respondents mentioned feeling lucky that the men at Harmony were as “evolved” as they were, in that they could share in both the emotional and physical labor involved in maintaining a household together. The gendered balance of power had not always been quite as satisfactory at Harmony, and some of those we interviewed told us that it took some of the men some period of time to come to terms with women taking strong leadership positions within the church. Now, however, those we spoke with seem satisfied with the operation of gender roles in the church, and grateful for the range of opportunities for both self-expression and support that they find there.

### **Holy Spirit Catholic Parish**

Holy Spirit Catholic Parish is adjacent to the Twin Cities proper, in an urban-density suburb that is visually indistinguishable from the urban area to which it is adjacent. Holy Spirit was founded in the mid-1800s by German farmers, making it one of the oldest churches in the area. The parish experienced its last peak in activity during the postwar suburban building boom of the 1950s, when residents moved from the city to “inner-ring” suburbs to raise families. The area in which Holy Spirit is located experienced a dramatic increase in population and subsequent development, and as a result, one large section of Holy Spirit’s current membership is comprised of the mothers and fathers of the families of this



earlier generation. The majority of their children have moved either into the city or across the country, and parishioners are now elderly, retired, and inevitably expiring. The other large section of Holy Spirit's membership is comprised of new immigrant families.

What is unique at Holy Spirit Catholic Parish is the increasing participation and new membership of South and Central American immigrants in the surrounding area. Latino immigrants at Holy Spirit come from a wide variety of nations: Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, Columbia, Peru, Ecuador, Venezuela, and Costa Rica (a small handful of families come from Nigeria and Asian nations, as well). At Holy Spirit, two worlds are colliding where the older, established Anglo retirees are finding they have to share their parish with incoming young immigrant families. Head priest Father Johnson explains, "It's almost like there are two parishes." Many of the new immigrant families do not speak English, are relatively new to the country, and often have noisy small children to which the elderly are quite unaccustomed to have tearing and giggling down the pews of their once-quiet sanctuary.

Although there are 600-plus families registered "on the books" at Holy Spirit, all families do not register for formal membership. According to Father Johnson, their Latino parishioners tend to not do so for "cultural reasons," due to the nature of their orientation to church membership, and also because of the high level of mobility of many of the Latino families and individuals. Johnson estimates that the parish is about half Anglo and half Latino—although he qualifies that the Latino parishioners will very soon outnumber the Anglo parishioners, if their numbers have not already surpassed them. The majority of the Latino parishioners are either young families with small children or single young/middle-aged men living alone who have come to the area for work. Spanish-speaking families at Holy Spirit often live in extended family arrangements, and it is not uncommon for a couple of brothers to buy a home together to house their wives, their children, and perhaps a grandmother. There are some Spanish-speaking and Anglo single mothers at Holy Spirit, no known single fathers, some young singles of both sexes, a small handful of older Latino members, and a good deal of elderly Anglo parishioners.

Although there are still a small amount of young Anglo families at Holy Spirit (who are living largely in nuclear family arrangements), for the most part, the established parishioners are almost all elderly, retired, and uniformly middle class. As for the Latino parishioners, most of them hold entry-level positions, and many of them are employed in the service economy. Although many of the South American immigrant parishioners came to the United States with education and training in other skilled and specialized occupations, they have found it hard to work in their chosen

field because of language and credential transfer problems. As a result, many of the immigrant parishioners are low-wage workers.

*Family Practices* At Holy Spirit, new programming is developed through both members' suggestions and leaders' ideas. For Johnson, making sure both Anglo and Latino parishioners' needs are met has sometimes been a difficult balancing act. Older, established parishioners have expressed the concern that too many of the parish's resources are being diverted to immigrant families. Spanish-speaking youth enjoy on-site faith-formation classes, whereas English-speaking youth must go to a nearby parish for their religious education as there are too few of them to support their own on-site program. Anglo parishioners enjoy a retirees group called, "Forever Young," where they gather for a monthly meal and sometimes have a speaker and/or fundraising activity. Health screenings, faith formation for adults, and counseling are offered for parishioners speaking both languages.

The main way in which the parish tries to help families meet the challenges they encounter is by structuring activities in such a manner as to allow families to participate as a unit. For example, in Spanish-language religious education, parents take their children to adults' classes, and in youth religious education, children take their parents to class with them. In this manner, the entire family finds a forum in which they can participate together. Another way in which the congregation tries to serve families is through a social service program housed in the parish called VISTA. At VISTA, Latino parishioners and nonmembers from the surrounding area can take English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, receive legal counseling, pick up clothing and furniture, get their children involved in tutoring and after-school programs, and get referrals to other social services. Although cooperation between the parish and VISTA has not yet been optimized, both VISTA representatives and parish leaders are hopeful that they can increasingly exercise opportunities for partnership.

One such example of the partnership between VISTA and the parish was the Dia de los Niños celebration, where children and their families came to play games, read stories, sing songs, prepare and eat foods, and perform dances they had learned in faith formation classes. Families attending the event were also able to obtain information from various social service and community organizations that set up tables in the church auditorium. The implicit cultural model of family promoted at the Dia de los Niños celebration was very much an extended family model, as children, mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents were all welcome and participating. In families with two parents, both parents were expected to come and participate equally in this activity with their

children. In contrast, the Gospel discussion group we attended—designed to bring Anglo and Latino families together over a dinner—promoted a very different model of family. Although described as a “family event” by one of the organizers, she later explained that most people did not usually bring their children. Of the families that did bring children, either those children were old enough to be helpful in the kitchen, sit quietly at the table (during a rather lengthy Gospel discussion), or play unsupervised in a separate room with some toys. Presumably, then, those responsible for the care of small children were excluded from the event, as many adults came alone, and those who came in the company of another adult did not have children in their family. Implicit in this understanding of “family event” was either a caretaking parent or access to childcare.

*Family Rhetoric* “Family ministry” is a term not often used at Holy Spirit, because as Father Johnson explained, they try to construct community “on a more basic level.” However, both he and Deacon Perez insisted that meeting the needs of families is a concern that is lived every day in the parish, despite the absence of the language of “family ministry.” Also absent is programming by family membership, as church leadership is generally more concerned with social justice issues (immigration law, employment practices, housing, healthcare, etc.) that end up impacting families and individuals regardless of their family structure. Although no parishioners mentioned that GLBT persons who made their sexuality known would be refused or shunned, interviewers made it clear that gay and lesbian “behavior” certainly would not be “condoned,” and would still be regarded as “sinful,” despite their “acceptance” into the community.

While Johnson cited spending time, good communication, and good interactions as elements of a strong family, Perez emphasized the need for work and respect within the family unit. Ultimately, all respondents in a leadership capacity at the parish placed heterosexual marriage at the center of a “good” family, and generally spoke in terms of one nuclear family per household being the ultimate goal, with a mother, father, and their children as the ideal occupants. Furthermore, cohabitation is something that is unmistakably undesirable at Holy Spirit, and many strongly believe that “family” does not exist before marriage. Both members and leaders made their opinion clear that a religious marriage as a foundation for family cements the unit as nothing else can. One parish leader spoke of his commitment to “coax, cajole and challenge” cohabiting couples into marriage. Interview data from respondents include stories of couples who could not afford a wedding and therefore chose to leave the parish over the pressure to marry.

The needs of the two parish communities would collide in some instances, and Sunday Mass and joint activities were the primary sites. The older Anglos were very used to a style of family programming whereby children were usually kept more separated from the adult activities. In contrast, the younger immigrant families tended to bring their children to Mass and parish events and usually liked to try to keep their children with them most of the time—both because there is a difference in cultural understandings about when it is appropriate to include children, and to a lesser degree, because of a shortage of accessible childcare. As many respondents explained, it is a “cultural thing” for parents to want to be with their children as much as possible, both because families are “tight-knit,” and because it is more convenient for them to participate as a unit. Many of the Spanish-speaking families were drawn to the church for the explicit purpose of getting sacraments and extracurricular activities for their children. Furthermore, Latino participants tended to think of their involvement with the church as a familial engagement, whereas membership for Anglos—while counted by family—is something they thought about and talked about in slightly more individual terms. Much of the difficulty that arose in attempts to integrate Holy Spirit’s two groups surrounded differing cultural understandings about “the family” and differing ideas about the ideal relationship between family and parish.

For the Anglo parishioners, having a “family-oriented” parish meant having a forum where they could gather with the other mothers and fathers with whom they raised their children—often, they lived right down the street from each other, their children attended school together, etc. For the immigrant parishioners, a “family-oriented” environment translated into having the type of parish where children are welcome for all activities the adults are involved in, and where families can enjoy parish-related activities together as a unit. Additionally, new immigrant families faced hardships far divorced from the reality of the lives of the older established parishioners. The “ideal family” for Anglo parishioners exhibits common goals despite their individuality, has good communication, and love, keeps God at the center of their lives, and is capable of “meeting on common ground.” The “family values” Latino interviewees cited were love, open communication, and respect.

Ultimately, cohabiting couples are stigmatized at Holy Spirit. Despite interview data indicating that respondents may wish to postpone marriage until life is more settled and predictable, or until they could afford a sometimes costly celebration, the parish leadership was not open to the view that marriage can be a privilege dictated by social class and citizenship status, and there was no legitimacy granted to households that include a same-sex committed relationship for which marriage is not a

legal option. Holy Spirit respondents shared that they expected that GLBT persons would be received reasonably well by the community, but that their “behavior” or “lifestyle” would nevertheless be regarded as “sinful.” In addition, another point to consider is the assumed position of the interviewer as “young liberal,” and a potential reluctance on the part of the respondents to therefore share a possible belief that lesbians and gay men are to be at best shunned and at worst condemned.

*Gender* Holy Spirit was therefore a deeply ambivalent place in that it accommodated and sometimes encouraged extended family arrangements through both word and deed, while simultaneously reinscribing the nuclear family model as the cultural ideal. As a result, Holy Spirit provided spaces in which traditional gender scripts were both reinforced and challenged. Women were encouraged to seek help from, or even exit, abusive relationships, but this was linked to an image of women as vulnerable, not to a feminist or social justice framework. Deacon Perez commonly insisted that immigrant women in particular were vulnerable in their relationships with men outside the economic and social security that the bonds of marriage create. Also, according to both leaders and members, men and women are very different, have different needs, and should be recognized and treated as such. Father Johnson emphasized that men and women are very different and should strive to see each other as such. His emphasis on good marital communication was in the context of a formative assumption that innate differences between men and women are what make such communication difficult. In general, parishioners echoed this message of gender difference. At Holy Spirit, the potentially companionate, mutually supportive, and flexible aspects of an extended family model did not lead to progressive understandings of gender.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

These congregations display a range of family ideals that is wider than that found by Edgell (2006) in her study of religious communities in upstate New York. At Wharton and Holy Spirit, the extended family is supported in a range of practical and symbolic ways that elevate it to a near-parity with the nuclear family ideal. Moreover, in these congregations, the nuclear family model itself is quite different than the individualistic, self-expressive model that other commentators have written about with the mixture of admiration and dismay that Edgell (2006) argues often accompanies discussions of individualism. The “families all together” approach to ministry at

Holy Spirit and the FTT program at Wharton suggest that these congregations are radical innovators. These congregations do not have incremental variations on an older standard approach; they start from and institutionalize a fundamentally different model of the family. Likewise Harmony, the liberal Protestant church, is a radical innovator, particularly in the degree to which it has taken the nuclear family out of the center of congregational rhetoric and practice. At Harmony, people are encountered and embraced as individuals more than as couples or families, and that, too, is based on a fundamentally different model of what the family is and how the family, as an institution, should and does relate to the religious community.

Each of these congregations is something more than, and other than, a simple and straightforward expression of their religious tradition's official teachings and doctrine. Rather, they are creative cultural arenas where new understandings of the meaning of religious traditions, doctrines, and teachings are forged in ways that reflect the lives and experiences of local members and leaders. As living expressions of religious traditions, they are places to look for the innovations that may lead to larger changes over time (Becker, 1999; Edgell, 2006). In these congregations, we found creativity and new interpretation.

We also found a deep ambivalence around family models in these three congregations, and much of this surrounded the implications of family ideals for understandings of gender. It requires a great deal of persistent "cultural work" to sustain truly innovative cultural forms in an institutional landscape that is dominated by a different cultural model (Becker, 1998; Swidler, 2001). This institutional landscape comprises not only other religious communities but also local families and other community institutions all of which tend to proceed as though the interdependency between religion and family, and the standard way of managing this interdependency, is taken for granted. There is a great deal of tension between the more innovative family models each congregation has developed, that make sense of the lives and experiences of the members, and the culturally dominant SNAF model, and this tension comes out particularly in regard to understandings of gender.

At Wharton and Holy Spirit, this tension is evident in the kinds of boundary maintenance we observed regarding the gender implications of certain family ideals. At Holy Spirit, the affirmation of extended family ties and an all-the-family-together approach to ministry was *not*, as we were instructed repeatedly by the priest and deacon, to be taken as license to live together without marriage. Nor is it a reason to forget that women and men have fundamentally different natures, needs, and roles. At Wharton, the FTT program valorizes extended family ties while being embedded in a thorough critique of the emasculating conditions that

African-American men encounter and the forces that undermine their ability to take their rightful place as breadwinners and providers for their families. On the one hand, each congregation is a place where some new gender scripts are being written. In each, women's lives and especially their practical needs and concerns are taken seriously, and issues important to women's wellbeing are treated as public and important—even domestic violence, a subject taboo in many congregations (Nason-Clark, 1996). On the other hand, the limits of innovation in regard to gender are well established, publicly spoken, and often reinforced by the leaders.

Harmony has the least ambivalence over gender, and it is because both their commitment to progressive family ideals and to feminist understandings of gender spring from the same sources—their theological commitment to social justice. The culture work here to integrate family and gender ideals is less noticeable, and the tension is much reduced. At Harmony, (virtually) everybody is a feminist and the cultural critique of the nuclear family as a source of patriarchal oppression can be elicited even in casual conversation (and was, on the very first evening that Edgell walked into the church, while waiting for a meeting of the church board to begin). Moreover, the individualism that underpins the approach to ministry makes gender *and* family status less important in determining the way that one participates in congregational life. However, there was still additional work to do to achieve gender parity in the leadership at Harmony. Denominational and theological commitments to feminist understandings, shared by most members, served as an important cultural resource for local leaders at Harmony when they wanted to challenge limits on women's leadership. But those limits did need to be challenged, and they seemed to stem from the intersection with other institutions which help to make SNAF so pervasive and taken for granted.

It is important to understand the limits to innovation in these congregations. The first limit is the co-incorporation of ideals associated with the SNAF model alongside the extended family ideal at Holy Spirit and Wharton and the accompanying association of a nuclear family model with economic stability. In both congregations, fostering the stable participation in family life by husbands and fathers overrides all other aspects of their culture work. The family-all-together approach to ministry at Holy Spirit is a good way for women to gain support, and for pastoral leaders to encourage men to be stable, sober, and employed and couples to marry. The FTT program at Wharton is designed to give children access to male guidance, role models, and practical help, and despite a critique of the more structural aspects of poverty, marriage is also promoted as a solution to economic instability. For these congregations, existing in an interinstitutional environment that does not make alternative family and

gender arrangements economically feasible for most members intertwines with the cultural legitimacy of the SNAF model to ensure that radical innovation in family ministry does not lead to a radically different view of gender. The second limit is the one encountered at Harmony, where public leadership is still coded as male and requires cultural work to recode as gender neutral, *despite* a cultural repertoire that is not only explicitly feminist but explicitly oriented to larger conceptions of social justice. Congregations that are within denominations or traditions that have an explicit commitment to feminism as part of a larger social justice framework find it is easier to integrate progressive understandings of the family with a progressive approach to gender.

On the other hand, in a time when much of the public religious rhetoric in the society is informed by a white, middle-class, conservative Protestant understanding of family values, it is useful to look at how a wider range of religious communities imagine and enact both family and gender. Our exploratory analysis suggests that the variation is greater than we might have believed, and that some religious communities are responding meaningfully to the particular experiences of poor and working class families, incorporating an extended family model, and bringing women's concerns to public light within the community. We believe it is important to continue to explore the intersection of family ideals and gender, and that religious institutions are a primary arena in which this intersection is ascribed within a moral framework that can be very powerful (Gerson, 2002). Will this cultural power work to contain and limit our understanding of men's and women's natures, their lives, and their concerns, or will it work to open up opportunities for innovation and change? We hope that this question will motivate research that is inclusive, thoughtful, and reflexive, reflecting the diversity of the American religious landscape.

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