

The Church in Transition:
An Observation of the Core at the Front Porch

Steven Fouse

REL 771: Congregations on the Ground

Dr. John Schmalzbauer

The Church in Transition

In the heart of downtown Springfield, Missouri, there exists a storefront that looks like many others on South Avenue. A brick and glass building with a bright red top, a sign proclaims this place to be “The Front Porch,” a designation reminiscent of days when neighbors and friends would rock in chairs, sip coffee, read books, discuss life, and most importantly relax and be at ease. Promotional t-shirts proclaim the Front Porch to be a “third space,” a place that is neither home nor work but a public space in which a person can exist and be



known.¹ And a public venue is exactly what the Front Porch is: during any given week, discussion groups, addiction recovery groups, art gatherings, concerts by local bands and musicians, and even religious gatherings all take place in this narrow² downtown shop. Paintings and photographs by local artists adorn the walls, available for enjoyment and for sale, and a wide selection of books lines the common room, with topics ranging from psychology to money management to classic literature and self-help books. All of these services are supplemented by a coffee and tea bar, serving modestly priced refreshments for patrons. The Front Porch is designed to be a casual, relaxing place to participate in the artistic and social cultures of downtown Springfield, and it did not happen that way by accident.

The Front Porch is a non-profit organization started by a Christian group called the Core

¹ The “Third Space” concept was first introduced by Ray Oldenburg in *The Great Good Place: Cafés, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community* (New York: Paragon House, 1989).

² “Twenty-two feet wide, one hundred sixteen feet long.” Mike Mikulan, interviewed by Steven Fouse, digital recording, 27 November 2011, The Front Porch, Springfield, MO.

Fellowship. The Core Fellowship began as a house church in Springfield, Missouri, in 2005. Sharing a love for the arts, relationships, and downtown Springfield, the Core committed to opening the Front Porch, which officially opened on August 31st, 2007.³ This multi-purpose site was started to give a public face to the Core Fellowship, allowing them the opportunity to share the love of God with whoever walked through the doors. Completely volunteer-run, the Front Porch provides a social venue for the creative culture of the downtown area.

Amid the flurry of concerts, performances, “open mic” nights, game nights, and discussion groups, the Core Fellowship holds its weekly meetings at the Front Porch venue. Like the sign outside that greets passers-by, the Front Porch is a product of the Core Fellowship, and as such, several characteristics emerge distinguishing it from many other congregational meeting places. The Core Fellowship intentionally mutes religious imagery and vocabulary, choosing to create a religiously neutral environment in



which to welcome the public. No crosses or icons adorn the meeting space, and even the words “Christian” and “church” are absent from the sign outside. In addition to being distinctly non-religious, the Core’s productions are graphically well-designed. There are no haphazard signs or documents. Everything is obviously created with care and attention to detail, combining multiple fonts, watermarks, and images in both the background and foreground. Such a combination of understated religiosity and precision design has occasionally left outside observers wondering about the purpose and function of the Front Porch as they walk by on South Avenue. Even upon

³ Information from “The Core Fellowship at the Front Porch,” an informational pamphlet produced by the Core Fellowship.

entering the Front Porch on a Sunday morning to participate in the Sunday Gathering can create an impression of instability in spite of the precision volunteer coordination and careful design of the common area. Of what is the Core Fellowship an example? I had trouble pinning this group to many of the categories of Christianity as I understand it. The pastor, Ryan Wiksell, was trained at a local Pentecostal college, but worked in two different local Baptist congregations, and many of the attendees are Baptist or Pentecostal. Is this a Baptist group or a Pentecostal one? It also serves as the home congregation for a number of college students from several local colleges and universities. Does this group function as a campus ministry? Is it part of the emerging church movement? The Core Fellowship is clearly a congregation in transition from the commonly accepted concept of congregational Christianity toward some as-yet undefined idea of practiced congregational Christianity. Setting these categorizing questions aside, my understanding of the Core at the Front Porch grew when observing their Sunday Gathering, specifically regarding their use of visual culture, food, music, and sacred text.

Visual Culture

Though the Core at the Front Porch has no overtly religious visuals, the visual cultures of the group and the building are rich. The Core Fellowship may qualify as what Richard Florida calls “the creative class.” The creative class values the “quality of place” in three ways: what's there (both the constructed environment and the natural environment), who's there (the diversity of people making a life in the community), and what's going on (including the vibrant street life, arts, music, and café culture).⁴ Such creative values are apparent in the architecture and visuals of the Front Porch venue. While being a religious group, the art of the Core is often religious in

⁴ Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 232.

nature, although not as overly religious as might be expected; they conform to the overarching theme of muted religious imagery. They state that “there is no difference between a sacred object and a secular object,”⁵ and that belief is supported by their largely non-religious meeting space. The area in front of the stage is used as the gathering place for each Sunday Gathering, and participants are seated at café tables. Each table setup for their Sunday Gathering contains literature about the Core Fellowship and the Front Porch, as well as blank paper and pens and pencils. Participants are verbally encouraged to take notes on the message, write down items for prayer, or create art with the materials provided. Several participants draw each week, and when enough art is collected, it is displayed. The art produced is not only indistinguishably Christian, it occasionally contains imagery more consistent with eastern religions (the yin-yang symbol and dragons, for instance). The Core also uses visual media as a part of its Sunday Gatherings. The piano that adorns the stage, often appearing as a prop, is actually functional and used as an instrument. Words for songs are projected onto a screen above and behind the stage. No other images are portrayed with the words; simple white letters on a black screen are the extent of the projected visuals during the song service. High-art is occasionally used as examples for material in sermons.



This nonconformist approach to visual culture may lead the casual observer to believe the Core Fellowship does not place value on visual imagery, but such an assumption could not be further from the truth. It is because visual imagery is so powerful and meaningful that the Core

⁵ Ryan Wiksell, interviewed by Steven Fouse, digital recording, 27 November 2011, The Front Porch, Springfield, MO.

Fellowship eschews its use in most of its material culture. David Morgan and Sally Promey note that there are at least four ways imagery is powerful in relation to religious practice:

First, images are understood to communicate between human and divine realms in an economy of ritualized exchange. Second, they help establish the social basis of communion by consolidating and reinforcing a range of allegiances, large and small. Third, images help create and organize memory. And fourth, they fuel constructive, synthetic acts of imagination in the kind of meaning-making practices that form a basic aspect of religious experience.⁶

Based on this understanding of visual culture for communication, communion, commemoration, and imagination,⁷ the Core clearly understands the power attached to traditionally Christian symbols and words, both the power to attract as well as repel, and has therefore decided to forgo them. “Mik” Mikulan, the men's ministry leader of the Core Fellowship, says they “enjoy the fact that people can come here three or four times, and then they find out that we're actually a church, and that catches their interest...and helps them tone down the stereotypes of religious people.”⁸ By avoiding overtly Christian imagery, the Core communicates an openness to discussion about Christianity and religion in general; they create a community of like-minded people, those not specifically looking for “church as usual”; they commemorate the things of value in the music and art communities; and they seek to open the imagination to the ways in which Christianity can be expressed to and for the benefit of the public. Ryan Wiksell compares an “auditorium” style gathering place with the Front Porch's gathering place, saying that “a

⁶ David Morgan and Sally M. Promey, *The Visual Culture of American Religions*, ed. David Morgan and Sally M. Promey (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 2-3.

⁷ Ibid, 14.

⁸ Mike Mikulan, interviewed by Steven Fouse, digital recording, 27 November 2011, The Front Porch, Springfield, MO.

coffee house venue...lends itself better to, I believe, to conversation and interaction.”⁹ Such a visual culture is not accidental, and clearly expresses who they want to be: a group of creatively-minded people expressing their Christian beliefs in an environment of religious pluralism and openness.

Food

The Core Fellowship's identity becomes a bit more blurred when observing its practice of food. The Core uses food predominantly in three ways: weekly Sunday Brunch, monthly Volunteer Meetings, and Communion, which happens every month or two. Every week at their Sunday Gathering, brunch is held from 10am to 10:30am. Volunteers sign up for brunch duty and are completely in control of what they fix and how it is served. The quality and quantity of these brunches varies, and as a result so does its reception. Most commonly, coffee and juice are served with donuts, with more elaborate breakfasts being in the minority. Monthly Volunteer Meetings center on food and discussion of important business. The Volunteers (which seems to be the closest designation the Core Fellowship has to a Member), those attendees who help run audio/video, teach in the children' program, sing or play instruments, or any number of other tasks, occasionally get together for a “picnic” or carry-in dinner. Such occasions are categorically different from the Sunday Brunches, being well-received and relished by all participants. As much time is devoted to discussing and enjoying the meticulously prepared food as is devoted to discussing the business at hand. Communion, however, functions much the way it does in many other Protestant congregations. The communion itself consists of Dixie cups of grape juice and cracker-like bread pieces. The communion is disseminated and discussed before consumption,

⁹ Ryan Wiksell, interviewed by Steven Fouse, digital recording, 27 November 2011, The Front Porch, Springfield, MO.

with participants partaking as a group on command. The emphasis of the communion practice is on remembering Jesus and communing together and with God. Like many other doctrinal issues at the Front Porch, differences of theological views are not highlighted and “the correct stance” on the meaning and function of communion is never presented. The communion clearly uses food for religious practice and with specific religious significance, while Sunday Brunch and the Volunteer Meetings seem to be devoted to fellowship and sharing a meal.

As a whole, the Core at the Front Porch uses food for purely social purposes. Most seem to appreciate food and take care when preparing it, but Sunday Brunch seems to be regarded with some skepticism or hesitation. Culturally, there seem to be two congregations that meet at the Front Porch: the larger crowd who likes food but invests little time or effort in its preparation (the Sunday Brunch crowd), and a smaller group who loves food, taking care in its preparation and relishing in its discussion and sharing (the Volunteer Meeting group). Often, homeless people¹⁰ would attend the Sunday Gathering simply for the Brunch, not participating in the organized practices of music, prayer, or discussion. The Core recognized this, and welcomed all who would come with no expectation of participation or involvement. It seems likely that the Sunday Brunch once had a more intentional focus toward community, but as a number of “outsiders” began taking advantage of the group's openness, the function of Sunday Brunch shifted from internal community to external service. Such a shift may have resulted in a decline in the group's creativity in order to accommodate the organization of a program. As a result, what was once a symbol of community in a creative culture gave way to an organized service to downtown Springfield. Such a tension between creativity and organization is recognized by

¹⁰ Ibid. Mikulan estimates 30% of the regular attendees at Sunday Gatherings at the Front Porch are homeless people.

Richard Florida as “perhaps the biggest issue at stake in this emerging age” of the creative class.¹¹ What begins creatively may be pulled toward standardization; what was once coffee and quiche may become coffee and donuts just by necessity. In spite of this seeming accommodation, the Core has retained its dedication to food in its monthly Volunteer Meetings, creatively preparing their dishes, not just for palatable enjoyment, but for social enjoyment as well. Special satisfaction is taken in finding, preparing, and sharing special dishes among the Core Fellowship Volunteers, hinting at the original culture of the group distinctive from their corporate practice on Sunday mornings.

Music

Music is an important aspect of the fabric of the Core at the Front Porch. In fact, Music (and the Arts) is one of three central values that comprise the reason the Front Porch exists, along with Spirituality and Community.¹² The Front Porch incorporates music not only in its Sunday Gathering, but also in concerts during the week by local artists, often free of charge. Much of the decor in the Front Porch glorifies music, from pictures of musicians on stage to phonograph record albums lining the top of the coffee bar, far out of reach. Music at the Front Porch seems to be used in a variety of ways. It is valued in and of itself as artistic expression and worthy of support and attention. During the Sunday Gatherings, music is used as background “mood music” during the brunch and



¹¹ Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, 22.

¹² Information from “The Core Fellowship at the Front Porch,” an informational pamphlet produced by the Core Fellowship.

socializing time, five modern worship songs or hymns typically begin each gathering, and music is also used to wrap up the group prayer time and transition into the discussion time. Music is most commonly used as primary sacrality and possibly liminally,¹³ transitioning people from their regular lives and activities into the realm of spirit and worship of God. Unlike the Sacred Harp singers Stephen Marini studied,¹⁴ it is clear that, to the Core Fellowship, the value of the songs is not just “the words” but also the effect and mood of the music. The mood of the music matches everything else at the Front Porch: not necessarily expressly religious, but creating a mellow mood and an atmosphere of reflection and calm.¹⁵

The participant reception to the use of music at the Front Porch during Sunday Gatherings is typical for a coffeehouse audience. Participation is assuredly optional, with several “participants” not singing or reacting in any visible way to the music of the Core Fellowship. It is perfectly normal for those participating in all other ways during the Sunday Gathering to simply sit quietly and listen. Many people choose to join in the singing, and they were certainly welcomed to do so. However, it is also not uncommon for people to be completely ambivalent toward the music, holding quiet conversations in the midst of the participating audience. So, while the theoretical function of the musical portions of the service at the Front Porch are for the worship of God and the ushering of the participant into a spiritual way of thinking, the practical function of the music may range from the intended function to background music or somewhere

13 Stephen A. Marini, *Sacred Song in America: Religion, Music, and Popular Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 30 & 86. In this book, Marini discusses some functions of religious music, one of which is progressing through a four-stage model of the ritual process, the third of which is liminality (being on the threshold of a sacred experience), and another of which is primary sacrality, meaning it is a sacred practice that occurs in a sacred location.

14 Ibid, 88.

15 In his interview, Wiksell described the music at the Front Porch as “very subdued.” Ryan Wiksell, interviewed by Steven Fouse, digital recording, 27 November 2011, The Front Porch, Springfield, MO.

in between. Functioning in this way, music at the Front Porch is like many other attributes of the congregation: fluid, adaptable, and lacking a specified and enforced function or purpose. This creates an atmosphere Mark Chaves would chart as “low ceremony, moderate to high enthusiasm.”¹⁶

Text

The structure of the Sunday Gathering is certainly geared toward intimacy, much like the home fellowship group studied by James Bielo.¹⁷ Like the Restoration Movement home group, the Core Fellowship divides its time to maximize personal interaction. One morning's time allotments were as follows: Brunch/Socializing, 10:00-10:35; Music, 10:35-10:54; Announcements, 10:54-11:03; Prayer Groups, 11:03-11:36; Message, 11:36-12:23 (143 minutes total; Brunch/Socializing 25%; Music 13%; Announcements 6%; Prayer Groups 23%; Message 32%). This meant that the message portion of the service, the longest segment, took up 32% of the total time, but the two highly social portions (Brunch/Socializing and Prayer Groups) took up a combined 48% of the total time. Much like the group studied by Bielo, the Front Porch's small group prayer time consists of discussing current life situations, sharing prayer requests and praises, and praying for those in one's group or for one's self. Ryan Wiksell describes their weekly gathering as “extremely laid back, and feels like a large house church, like, probably what you would experience in someone's home, if it was a house church.”¹⁸ The Front Porch clearly places import on intimacy and “smallness,” stating that it is how they set themselves apart

¹⁶ Mark Chaves, *Congregations in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 145-147.

¹⁷ James S. Bielo, *Words Upon the Word: An Ethnography of Evangelical Group Bible Study* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 73-94.

¹⁸ Ryan Wiksell, interviewed by Steven Fouse, digital recording, 27 November 2011, The Front Porch, Springfield, MO.

from other congregations.

One piece of homemade décor best expresses how the Core at the Front Porch views the Bible, their sacred text. One Sunday morning, a seemingly random box lid, made of white plastic, was found propped on the book shelf that spans the common area. On this lid someone had written their advice for “How to Listen to the Word of God.” I did not have my camera that morning, but I managed to recreate the lid, complete with capital letters as the author used them and the one misspelled word (see attached document). This hand-made guide certainly exemplifies how the Core thinks about and uses the Bible; it is considered “The Word of God,” and while the word “infallible” has not been used as long as I have attended, I believe “inspired” has. I found the author's admonition to listen to the Bible “FAITHFULLY” and “NO MATTER WHAT” especially revealing about how most attendees probably regard and use the biblical text. The Bible clearly has authority over their lives (“humbly,” “repentantly,” “trustingly”), and the rhetoric during the discussion time did not negate that authority. When asked in interviews, Mik Mikulan and Ryan Wiksell both chose to deviate from the four options presented regarding the authority of the Bible, although in different ways.¹⁹ Mikulan stated that “I don't believe any of these answers,” agreeing that the Bible is the inspired word of God, and trusting God with the parts we don't understand.²⁰ Wiksell said that he agreed with mostly the second option, but that the Bible is the actual word of God and also recorded by man.²¹

19 The four options presented were: 1) The Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word. 2) The Bible is the inspired word of God but not everything should be taken literally, word for word. 3) The Bible is an ancient book of fables, legends, history, and moral precepts recorded by man. 4) Other.

20 Mike Mikulan, interviewed by Steven Fouse, digital recording, 27 November 2011, The Front Porch, Springfield, MO.

21 Ryan Wiksell, interviewed by Steven Fouse, digital recording, 27 November 2011, The Front Porch, Springfield, MO. Ryan agrees with portions of all of the options regarding Biblical authority.

The discussion time at the Front Porch is commonly led by Ryan Wiksell, the pastor and founder of the Core Fellowship. The text is the focus of the discussion,²² and it is examined with regard to social and textual context while also including many instances of textuality and personal application. Strong doctrinal stances are generally avoided, or, rather, differing views are explained and welcomed. As a part of the discussion, participants are welcomed and encouraged to dialogue about the subject being discussed, to offer opposing views or opinions, and to ask questions of Wiksell and the group regarding the discussion at hand. This practice agrees perfectly with the intentional focus on intimacy discussed above regarding the time allotment of a typical Sunday Gathering.

Conclusion: The Church in Transition

The Core at the Front Porch is highly fluid in its practice of reading, music, food, and visual culture. The culture of the group is so casual and spontaneous that they jokingly say, “There is no normal at the Front Porch.” During any given Sunday Gathering, there could be any number of technical glitches, interruptions from the downtown community, or volunteer mishaps that render the regularly scheduled events “irregular.” One participant confided that it is through these random and varied interruptions to their plans that they continue to rely on God as the source of their stability. The Core Fellowship embraces a culture of change and fluidity, of accepting what comes and expressing their love for God and downtown Springfield by whatever means available. The resulting religious practice some would call inconsistent or unreliable; the Core Fellowship recognizes this and welcomes people to seek God wherever they feel at home. But downtown, right next to one of downtown Springfield's most popular bars, the Core at the

²² Mike Mikulan, interviewed by Steven Fouse, digital recording, 27 November 2011, The Front Porch, Springfield, MO. Mik proclaims “we always try to have the Bible as our focus, except for those groups that are non-biblical in nature, like our Art Club.”

Front Porch hosts recovery group meetings, feeds homeless people in a warm, safe environment, and supports the local art and music communities with a venue for performance and exhibition, all while offering a public worship service designed to be open to all.

Like the leaders of Mosaic, a large multi-ethnic and creative congregation, the Core Fellowship is “accustomed to unexpected change, disrupted schedules, and lack of resources for ambitious projects.”²³ Yet for a people so used to the unexpected, the Core is experiencing it in a way they never have to date: as of this moment, the Front Porch no longer exists. Over the last several years, declining attendance coupled with declining financial support from attendees has resulted in the monthly costs of operating the Front Porch exceeding the income. Despite a feasible idea to incorporate a successful local restaurant into the venue, efforts to remain financially viable have been unsuccessful. So this week, December 11, 2011, the Core Fellowship merged with a congregation meeting at Canvas, a downtown art venue also located on South Avenue.

So what exactly is the Core Fellowship, formerly the Core at the Front Porch? They don't align with Baptists or Pentecostals, although they have previous ties with both groups. They aren't a campus ministry, although they certainly attract their share of college students. They aren't a social outreach, although their acceptance of the Springfield homeless community is visible in their actions. Several previous studies point toward what this congregation is. Richard Flory states it best when he identifies several characteristics of “Generation X religion”:

Generation X religion emphasizes the sensual and experiential, combining the sacred and the profane and incorporating text, image, music, dance, and the body as venues for the expression of religious beliefs...[it] is entrepreneurial in finding cultural and institutional space to create new religious expressions based on their existing lifestyle interests...it

²³ Gerardo Marti, *A Mosaic of Believers: Diversity and Innovation in a Multiethnic Church* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 120.

roots the quest for religious identity in community, rather than a more purely personal spiritual quest...there is an insistence on an “authentic” religious experience in GenX religion, both on the part of the individual and as found in the religious communities that GenXers choose to join, that acknowledges the ambiguities, trials, and successes of life.²⁴

If ever the sum of the Core Fellowship could be succinctly stated, this would be it. The Core Fellowship, while not antagonistic about other ways of practicing Christianity, is not content to continue practicing it the way it is most commonly done. They seek to not just practice communal Christianity in a new way, but also to offer it to the public even as it is being created among them. The “personal relationship with the Lord” is not the only focus for the Core; the focus now includes the community of the Core and also the community of downtown Springfield. Erasing the line between the sacred and the profane, the Core has inserted itself into the culture of South Avenue in a way they felt important and meaningful. So why didn't it work? In a chapter entitled “Building the Creative Community,” Richard Florida has a theory: “The answer is simple. These cities are trapped by their past.”²⁵ Ryan Wiksell, lamenting over the closing of the NPO, said, “In another city, this would have worked.” Perhaps he is right. Perhaps Springfield is too trapped by its past, by the way organized Christianity has been practiced for several hundred years. Perhaps the Core Fellowship will blend with the congregation at Canvas. Perhaps they will cease their religious creativity and rejoin “normal” Christianity, but that seems unlikely. The Core is innovative, creative, and open. “Their failure to commit to traditional religious and denomination structures does not signal their lack of interest in questions about meaning and values. Instead, it signals that new institutions are being birthed, and that current

²⁴ Richard W. Flory, *GenX Religion*, ed. Richard W. Flory and Donald E. Miller (New York: Routledge, 2000), 234-235.

²⁵ Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, 303.

ones must be reinvented if they are to survive.”²⁶ Something new is being created in Christianity, and the Core Fellowship is part of that new creation.

²⁶ Richard W. Flory, *GenX Religion*, 3.

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The Core at the Front Porch: Pictures of Interest



The Information Booth near the entrance to the Front Porch.



The coffee bar and kitchen.



What seems like a mile of books spanning the length of the venue.



The drink menu: professional design even for beverage lists.



Cozy seating near the front door and at the bar.



Cozy seating near the stage, occasionally called "the peanut gallery."



Art by local artist adorned the walls.



The piano on stage. The Core Fellowship never utilized the stage for Sunday Gatherings. It was for concerts only!



The gathering space for the Core Fellowship's Sunday Gatherings.



Ryan Wiksell discusses men, women, and God in "The Sexes."



The great chandelier hanging over the gathering space.



Collected art collage. Wall decoration. Symbol of the Core Fellowship?