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# Practical Theology in an Interpretive Community: An Ethnography of Talk, Texts and Video in a Mediated Women's Bible Study

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# Practical Theology in an Interpretive Community:

# An Ethnography of Talk, Texts and Video in a Mediated Women's Bible Study

by

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of the requirements for the degree of
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# DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to the women in the Bible study group. This research would not have been possible without you. Although I cannot thank you individually by name because I changed your names to protect your personal identities, I can express my sincere appreciation. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for making me feel so welcome every Thursday morning for a year and a half. Thank you for your trust, for telling your personal stories and speaking freely even though I was recording your conversation. Thank you for your fellowship, your wisdom, and your advice. Thank you for your prayers and emotional support while I was going through an extremely challenging Ph.D. program far from my home and family. Thank you for the jokes and the laughter that made my research feel more like fun than work. I will never forget you, and I feel very blessed to have been a member of your wonderful group.

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ABSTRACT

This study of social interaction in a small religious group used ethnography of communication as a research method to collect and analyze data from 20 months of fieldwork. As a long-term participant-observer in a women-only interdenominational Bible study, I investigated the group's patterned ways of speaking, how print and electronic learning materials influenced the practical application of Scripture to daily life, and how the contemporary format for women's Bible study alters the traditional Bible study experience. Patterned ways of speaking in this setting included group discussions and conversational narratives about religion, motherhood and lack of time. Using affirmations of faith, mentoring advice and troubles talk that included indirect complaints, the women co-constructed new meanings in relational talk. The mediated Bible study experience shifts to women interpretive authority that has been dominated by clergy and men. Text and talk in the workbooks and videos stimulated interpretive conflict and reframing that gave the women intellectual autonomy and recognition for co-constructing knowledge as social worth. Storytelling in the workbooks, videos and local group membered the participants through shared identity, and multimodal learning materials stimulated critical thinking and mediated emotional intimacy in a national and global community. This interpretive community was therefore engaged in what I call women-centered practical theology, and their individual and collective reinterpretation of Scripture is characteristic of the postmodern reformation of Christianity.

# CHAPTER ONE:

# INTRODUCTION

A prominent feature of today's religious landscape is the expanding range of options available for small group participation as a way of enriching spiritual practice. For present-day church goers, participation in small religious groups often fills a void that is not fully met by attendance at traditional church services (Dougherty & Whitehead, 2011). Group participants who meet together to read and discuss Scriptural texts often report a sense of "belonging" in an atmosphere of personal growth that they feel is unique to the small group religious experience. In their predictions for religious trends, Donahue and Gowler (2014) suggest that "small groups are here to stay" because they fulfill a need for community in a fragmented society where the population is culturally diverse, families are geographically widespread, and workers often relocate (p. 131).

One particular and increasingly popular small group format is electronically-mediated Bible study. In such formats, traditional Bible-reading and discussion is complemented by the use of other learning materials such as recorded lectures and workbooks. Group interaction in such settings can take varied forms as participants listen and watch videos together, sometimes responding verbally in unison upon being prompted by the speaker in the video. Members can engage in discussion not only about the Scriptural text but also about the speaker's interpretation of the text. However, these enhanced opportunities for interpretation raise new and complex

questions about the group dynamics of these social contexts and how they may shape or reshape participants' interpretations of Scriptural texts.

In this dissertation, I describe the results of a long-term ethnographic study of an electronically mediated women's Bible study group in order to gain insight into their communication practices. Such a study that focuses on group interaction around multimodal religious materials can deepen understanding of an important trend in U.S. Protestant churches. A communication perspective that attempts to analyze naturally-occurring group discussions can be particularly useful in revealing how language co-constructs new meanings in social interaction. Such an approach holds the potential to provide a comprehensive portrait of the interplay of talk, texts and video in a small religious group.

In the remainder of this chapter I provide a summary of relevant literature and show how it provides a foundation for the research questions I will address. Areas of relevant literature include: (a) religious Bible study and the small group movement; (b) the emergence of electronically mediated Bible studies for women; (c) interpretive authority in Christian communities and in academic and popular literature; (d) storytelling and interpretive conflict in interpretive communities; (e) communication practices in small religious groups; and (f) the co-construction of practical theologies in small religious groups. In subsequent chapters I describe my methodological approach, ethnography of communication, analyze my data, and discuss and reflect on the findings of this study.

**Religious Bible Study and the Small Group Movement**

The United States has experienced a religious revival that began during the 1980s with the Moral Majority and religious right political movements (Flory & Miller, 2008). Bible study groups and other small religious groups have been part of that revival and are now commonplace

in large and small congregations (Dougherty & Whitehead, 2010). Known simply as "small groups," these social structures were created for relational purposes: (a) small groups provide a sense of community; (b) today's Christian education requires applying religious concepts to real life; and (c) small groups function as social support, which fits into Christian theology (Rynsburger & Lamport, 2008, p. 116). Christian leaders and educators advocate small groups and say they are necessary for spiritual growth (Frazee, 2001; Myers, 2003; Stanley & Willits, 2005). Indeed, Dougherty and Whitehead (2010) found that small groups fill a void that is not met by traditional church services; participants feel a sense of belonging in atmosphere of growth where they can find their place on their spiritual journey.

Surveys have shown that small groups are prevalent in American society. Wuthnow's (1994a) national survey showed that 40% of Americans were participating in small groups, and most of the participants were a member of more than one group. By 1998, 73.5% of all religious congregations had small groups that met at least once a month (Chaves, 1998). Small groups provide the members of large churches with intimacy and choice and solve the large-church problem of anonymity that occurs when one walks into a huge congregation and doesn't see any familiar faces (Schaller, 1992; Thumma, 1996). Dougherty (2003) found that ethnically diverse participants can bond through shared religion in small groups. Ammerman's (2005) national study of 549 congregations found that small groups do not only exist in giant churches, which are known as megachurches. Last year, a national survey of 35,000 adults–the Pew Research Center's 2014 Religious Landscape Study–indicated that 24% of Americans participate in prayer groups, religious study groups, or some type of religious education programs at least once a month, which is up from 23% in 2007. Among those who self-identify as Christian, more women (45%) than men (40%) participate in religious groups and programs.

Small religious groups have proliferated in American churches and synagogues for the same practical reasons that motivated the formation of social support groups during the 1960s. First, small groups cost nothing compared to the high costs of church programs and services (Wuthnow, 1994b). Small groups meet in churches and synagogues but also in private homes and public places such as community centers, bookstores, and neighborhood parks (Martin, 2007). Second, small groups responded to growing cultural diversity in Catholic, Protestant and Jewish organizations during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Third, the group dynamics encourage participants to talk and share their feelings (Bielo, 2009; Day, 2005; Lawson, 2006; Searl, 1994; Wuthnow, 1994a, 1994b), as opposed to silently listening to a mass lecture during a church service. Fourth, small groups provide mutual support, and many religions teach the concept that believers need each other for support in order to be strong in their faith. Fifth, participants are encouraged to think critically about their faith, and thinking critically about religious doctrine in a group results in a "new epistemology" (Wuthnow, 1994a, p. 43). "Knowledge was not something that already existed … it was something to be generated by the group itself through discussing the personal views of its individual members" (Wuthnow, 1994a, p. 43).

In their predictions for religious trends, Donahue and Gowler (2014) said that small groups have proliferated in American society because this 30-year movement fulfills a need for community in a fragmented society where the population is culturally diverse, families are geographically widespread, and workers often relocate (p. 131). In addition, small groups provide opportunities for the formation of intergenerational relationships and community service teams and relieve frustrations with the hierarchical leadership found in the typical congregation, which is modeled after corporations and other organizations (Donahue & Gowler, 2014). Todd's (2013) study in a rural region of the United Kingdom found that small groups are practicing

"practical theology" (p. 69). Biblical interpretation is driven by relational concerns in the belief that interpreting sacred text in a group where relationships are formed and applying religious concepts to real life will result in new insight into one's religious beliefs (Todd, 2013).

**The Emergence of Electronically Mediated Bible Studies for Women**

Electronically mediated women's Bible studies (WBS) are part of the small groups trend in the United States. This section summarizes how the leader in this movement and her pre-packaged Bible studies for women became popular and how extensively this religious movement has grown.

Christian author Beth Moore began this technology-oriented religious trend in 1997 when she published her first mediated Bible study for women, "To Live Is Christ: The Life and Ministry of Paul." Today she is the author of 15 WBS series that are Christian learning materials for small groups of women in various denominations of churches nationwide, and her longtime publishing company, LifeWay Christian Resources, now sells 73 different WBS series on its website and in its retail outlets, LifeWay Christian Stores. In response to consumer demand, Beth Moore has evolved into a celebrity who creates WBS, writes books, maintains her own blog, has her own cable television show, and tours the United States every year to give 12 public speaking performances entitled Living Proof Live conferences. Ticket prices to see her speak in sports arenas, concert halls and municipal auditoriums range from $45 to $69 per person. In 2010 *Christianity Today* magazine reported that 658,000 women had attended Moore's live events, and *The Grand Rapids Press* newspaper reported that her Living Proof Live events had been held in all 50 U.S. states (Bailey, 2010; Byle, 2010). Beth Moore also simulcasts one of her performances every year nationwide, and access to this event costs $1,500 for large churches,

$850 for small churches, and $20 per individual for solo viewers and women in small groups across America.

As a result of Beth Moore's success, mediated WBS have become mainstream educational materials in American churches. In 2010, *Christianity Today* called her "the most popular Bible teacher in America" (Bailey, 2010, para. 1). She has also inspired other Christian women to follow in her footsteps by writing similar Bible studies for women. Today the LifeWay website features 14 Christian women authors of WBS. The WBS movement has therefore grown into a sizeable industry. For example, Living Proof Live reported $5 million in 2011 income and $12 million in assets (Wilson, 2013). The growing popularity of its products and use among small groups of women is giving Christian women authors a voice in society and encouraging women who practice a patriarchal religion to think about their beliefs and reinterpret the meaning of their sacred text as it applies to their daily lives.

The leader of the WBS movement, Beth Moore, is known as a storyteller because she tells heartwarming humorous and serious personal narratives about herself and her family in her videos and writes them in her books. According to the biography on her website, her love of stories began when she was growing up in a small town in Arkansas (LPM, 2016). Her father was a retired Army major who owned a movie theatre, and she handed out free samples of popcorn and soda and watched the movies. Her favorite story, however, was the one she heard in Sunday school about Jesus, who loved children. When she was 18, she dedicated her life to serving God. After earning a bachelor's degree in political science, she married Keith, her husband of 35 years, had two daughters, taught Christian aerobics, and was a guest speaker at lunches and retreats for Christian women.

Beth Moore founded her ministries for women, Living Proof Ministries (LPM), in 1994 to provide interdenominational resources for all Christian women that would teach them how to "love and live" their sacred text (LPM, 2016). Perhaps because she was an experienced public speaker, the first mediated WBS included a video for each weekly lesson plan. Her publisher, LifeWay Christian Resources, published her first book, "A Woman's Heart," in 1997. A spokeswoman for LifeWay, Amy Cato, told *The Grand Rapids Press* in a 2010 article that Beth Moore began her ministry on her kitchen table and received so many invitations for public speaking events that she asked her publisher to begin coordinating them (Byle, 2010). "We prayed for 500 women for those first events, but sold out at about 2,000," Cato said. "We've been hanging on for the ride since then. We've sold out arenas and been across the country" (Byle, 2010, para. 8). One of the 7,300 women who attended the Living Proof Live event in Grand Rapids said she had completed most of Beth Moore's Bible studies. "Beth is just a hoot," she said. "She calls us girlfriends, and we really are" (Byle, 2010, para. 14).

Wide appeal is the reason behind the success of this Christian woman author and public speaker, according to a sociologist at Rice University. In a 2010 *Christianity Today* magazine article, Michael Lindsay said: "Moore is able to cross over to different pockets of evangelicalism. She has a tremendous appeal in that she has this homespun sensibility, yet there's a polished, savvy teaching style" (Bailey, 2010, para. 5). Beth Moore's interdenominational approach is unusual because she is a Baptist, and Baptists are known for being separatists (Bailey, 2010). She honed this approach while teaching a Bible study for women at her longtime church, First Baptist Church, a megachurch in Houston, for 15 years. A *Houston Chronicle* article said that 3,000 women attended this Tuesday night gathering for Beth Moore's 2010 study of David, which the (female) reporter characterized as "an event more like a

massive girls night out" that was in the theme of "man problems" (Cowen, 2010, para. 1). The article also included an interview with Beth Moore about her latest book, "So Long, Insecurity: You've Been a Bad Friend to Us" (Cowen, 2010). The main point in that book is for women to stop comparing themselves to media images of women, love their bodies, and live with dignity. During the past two decades, Beth Moore has evolved into a personable spokeswoman for all women.

More than a dozen other women have followed in Beth Moore's footsteps by creating mediated women's Bible studies (WBS) in the same workbook-plus-videos in multiple-week series format: (a) Priscilla Shirer, who is the author of 10 WBS and 12 books and co-founded Going Beyond Ministries with her husband Jerry; (b) Mary Jo Sharp, a former atheist who holds a master's degree in Christian Apologetics and is the author of 4 WBS; (c) Kelly Minter, an author, speaker, songwriter and singer whose products include books, music and 6 WBS; (d) Jennifer Rothschild, a funny storyteller who has authored 6 WBS and several books and devotionals for women; (e) Angela Thomas-Pharr, a national speaker and best-selling author of books for women who has created 6 WBS; (f) Vicki Courtney, a public speaker and best-selling author of books for mothers about raising teenagers, which is the theme of most of her 6 WBS; (g) Angie Smith, who holds a master's degree in developmental psychology and is author of 10 WBS and several books, including two best-selling children's books; (h) Lisa Harper, a former ministry director at Focus on the Family and a large church in Nashville who has authored 2 WBS and 6 books; (i) Jen Wilkin, author of 2 WBS and 3 books; (j) Margaret Feinberg, a public speaker and Bible teacher who has authored 2 WBS and 30 books; (k) Annie F. Downs, author of 1 WBS; (l) Raechel Myers, a storyteller who holds a bachelor's degree in housing and environmental design, and Amanda Bible Williams, who is earning a master's degree in religion,

new authors who have co-authored a new WBS; and (m) Rebekah Lyons, another new author of a new WBS.

The LifeWay website now sells 73 WBS and features Beth Moore and the above 14 Christian women authors, with a brief biography for most of them. I contacted the publisher via email and inquired about the total number of workbooks for WBS that have been sold, but I never received a reply, perhaps because the task would have entailed researching two decades of sales reports. Nonetheless, the number of Bible studies for women at my research site is an indicator of the rising popularity of these small groups. When I began my research in April 2013, there were only three Bible studies for women only listed on the church's website. Three years later, the church's website includes 6 WBS which meet every week. When I called the current Bible studies coordinator at my research site and asked to borrow the CDs for several WBS so I could watch them again, she said that five of the seven WBS that I requested (because I had participated in them) were currently being used by their women's Bible study groups! In sum, the number of mediated WBS products on the faith market and the number of women who are using them in small groups have increased significantly.

As this religious trend has proliferated in society, it has not been without critics. On blogs and in social media, Christian men – laypersons and pastors – and conservative evangelical Christian women have publicly criticized Beth Moore's teachings and interpretations of the Bible. Many have accused her of being a false prophet and false teacher who twists the truth in their sacred text (Germain, 2015; Hines, 2016; Wilson, 2013). Hundreds of comments by her fans and her critics, the latter both men and women, have been posted on *facebook* and on religious blogs. A United Methodist pastor warned all churches to ban Beth Moore's teachings in their congregations, which is significant because United Methodists are mainline Protestants

(Smith, 2011). A woman who criticized Moore on her blog was so overwhelmed by positive and negative comments that she closed the thread to new comments three months later (Shell, 2013). Beth Moore (2015) responded to this negative publicity by posting a column on her blog that called these hurtful comments from the religious community a "witch hunt." Hundreds of Moore's supporters posted sympathetic comments on her blog, but today the controversy continues. There is even a *facebook* page dedicated to bashing her, "Beth Moore – Exposed," that says her teachings are "demonic deception" (Chase, 2016). Mediated WBS are therefore a new format of religious practices that have changed American religion through widespread adoption and continue to generate controversy in increasingly media-oriented Christian communities.

**Interpretive Authority in Christian Communities**

Interpretation is an issue in Christian communities. Most Protestants believe that Bible verses are God's words, "communication from God to man" (Ong, 2000, p. 182). The divine aspect of this sacred text is why these believers refer to Scripture as "the Word" and capitalize the "W" in Word. The Bible was written when culture was still oral, but the existence of the alphabet made it possible for its authors to write the Word and create a historical record (Ong, 2000). In an oral culture where many people could not read and the Bible was not mass produced in book form, only the clergy had the authority to interpret Scripture to the masses (Tickle, 2008). The invention of the printing press in 1440, however, made it possible for everyone who was literate to read the Bible; the availability of printed Bibles thus shifted interpretive authority from the clergy to the masses (Tickle, 2008).

Controversy regarding who had the authority to interpret the Bible began during that time. After Martin Luther argued that the Bible was the only authority, "sola scriptura, scriptura

sola … [which means] only the Scripture and the Scriptures only," the Pope and Catholic clergy lost their authority to be sole interpreters between Christians and God (Tickle, 2008, p. 45). Known as The Great Reformation, this transfer of interpretive authority enabled "the priesthood of all believers" (Tickle, 2008, p. 53). In a written culture, laypersons no longer needed the clergy to interpret their sacred text for them. During this transition, the concept of thought changed from speaking to others without a script in oral culture to reading and writing alone in print culture; the latter created the "isolated thinker" (Ong, 2000, p. 54). Laypersons who read the Bible, however, interpreted Scripture in different ways; some interpreted the written words literally and others interpreted them metaphorically (Tickle, 2008).

The concept that the Bible was the only authority weakened over time due to scientific discoveries and political movements. Darwin's theory of evolution and the rise of science as innovation in society discredited the mysterious, divine and miraculous aspects of Christianity; everything became factual and was based on forces such as electricity, magnetism, gravity, biology and physics (Tickle, 2008). During the Civil War, American Protestant churches divided over the issue of slavery; Southern Christians argued that the Bible acknowledges yet does not condemn slavery. The feminist movement raised the issue of gender inequality in the Bible and in churches (Tickle, 2008). The Bible is a patriarchal male-dominated text written by men that excludes, marginalizes and undervalues women by focusing on the lives, perspectives and importance of men in society, and Christian women have complained that they experienced gender discrimination in male-dominated churches (Holmes & Farley, 2011; Johnson, 1993; Monk Kidd, 1992; Rayburn & Comas-Diaz, 2008; Ruether, 1983). Ethical issues such as abortion and assisted suicide also created controversy in Christian communities as believers took opposing political viewpoints (Tickle, 2008). These historical developments lead to biblical

criticism and liberal theology, including the "I'm spiritual but not religious" mantra that became popular during the 1970s (Tickle, 2008, p. 93).

Due to biblical criticism, liberal theology and interpretive conflict, Christianity is currently in the midst of a postmodern reformation that Tickle (2008) calls "The Great Emergence" (p. 51). "Every 500 years the empowered structures of institutionalized Christianity … become an intolerable carapace that must be shattered in order that renewal and new growth may occur" (Tickle, 2008, p. 16). In the postmodern era, Christians are deconstructing their sacred text based on Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle in science, which posits that absolute truth does not exist and truth is relative to each perceiver. As a result, "all writing – be it sacred or secular – has no innate meaning until it is read and, therefore, has no meaning outside of the circumstances and disposition of the reader" (Tickle, 2008, p. 79). The Internet and individually programmed devices such as smart phones have created virtual networks (Ong, 2000; Tickle, 2008). Christians are networking in cyberspace, where religious information is available to everyone but "without the traditional restraints of vetting or jurying; without the controls of informed, credentialed access; and without the accompaniment or grace of mentoring" (Tickle, 2008, p. 107). Denominations are becoming less important because the "new way of being Christian" is egalitarian and is influenced by theology from multiple denominations (Tickle, 2008, p. 135).

Interpretive authority in Christian communities remains controversial because in the postmodern era, fundamentalist literalists still believe that the Bible is the only authority (sola scriptura) but moderate non-literalists believe that they have individual interpretive authority. Furthermore, due to mediated communication and the egalitarian nature of The Great

Emergence, some Christians believe that they are co-constructing their theology via network theory, which is also called crowd sourcing (Tickle, 2008, p. 152). According to network theory:

> No one of the member parts or connecting networks has the whole or entire "truth" of anything, either as such and/or when independent of the others. Each is only a single working piece of what is evolving and is sustainable so long as the interconnectivity of the whole remains intact. (Tickle, 2008, p. 152)

The postmodern reformation of Christianity is thus a "conversation" that is ongoing and democratic because it is a theology that is "not a specific denomination but a mélange of "things" cherry-picked from different denominations" (Tickle, 2008, p. 134). Interdenominational mediated contemporary WBS are an exemplar of changing Christian practices in The Great Emergence because these pre-packaged learning materials shift interpretive authority from clergy and denominations to women in a small interpretive community.

**Interpretive Communities in Academic and Popular Literature**

Stanley Fish (1980) conceptualized the interpretive community to explain why academic literary critics find different meanings in the same text. He theorized that the reader does not passively absorb the author's intended meaning – the reader actively interprets meaning – and meaning is not universal or stable because reader interpretations can change over time and from group to group. When a group of readers extracts similar meaning from a text, it is due to shared beliefs and "a set of in-force assumptions" in that interpretive community (Fish, 1980, p. 357). In Fish's literary studies, authors within the same genre of literature belonged to the same interpretive community. Readers, however, may disagree about what those texts mean because

they belong to other interpretive communities. The members of an interpretive community share the same interpretive strategies because they see the text through a similar filter which is formed by that community. Interpretive communities thus "determine the shape of what is read" (Fish, 1980, p. 171). In his later work, Fish (1989) expanded the interpretive community to a shared point of view among a group of individuals that shapes how they organize their experiences, and he explained that the individual reader's "standards of judgment, canons of evidence, or normative measures are extensions of the community or communities of which he is a member" (p. 144). An interpretive community is therefore made up of a group of individuals who share the same frame of interpretation due to socialization and common beliefs and experiences.

Janice Radway (1984) extended the theory of interpretive communities to popular consumer literature by analyzing the reading practices of a group of women who were avidly reading romance novels. Radway surveyed and interviewed 16 women who bought their books from the same Midwestern bookstore and their leader, the (female) bookstore clerk who gave them advice regarding the best novels. Her study found that these consumers interpreted the texts differently than feminist scholars; whereas the academic readers interpreted the novels critically as oppressive to women, the romance readers interpreted the books positively as stories of "a woman's triumph" in teaching her values to the man she desired (Radway, 1984a, p. 58). The uneducated women readers, most of whom who were married and did not work outside of the home, interpreted the heroine's happy ending as her mastery of patriarchy because the heroine acquired the hero's attention, taught him how to be loving and caring to her, and succeeded in her quest for marriage (Radway, 1984b).

Interestingly, Radway's analysis indicated that reading these novels was a vital activity for the women that functioned in their lives as a protest against patriarchy yet also preserved it.

For these busy wives and mothers, reading was a "declaration of independence" that created private time to nurture the self (Radway, 1984b, p. 213). Reading romance novels gave them emotional gratification and vicarious attention and nurturing from a man. The act of reading was thus "compensatory" because it allowed the women to satisfy their own needs that were not being met in their marriages (Radway, 1984b, p. 211). In addition, the act of reading was "combative" in that it gave women the freedom to focus solely on themselves in a private space and refuse to serve others in the social roles of wife and mother within the patriarchal marriage (Radway, 1984b, p. 211). In this interpretive community, the act of reading functioned as "leave me alone" resistance to patriarchy, but the reader's Utopian interpretation justified as natural the patriarchal situation that was depleting her emotionally. Radway (1984a) concluded that "different readers read differently because they belong to what are known as various interpretive communities, each of which acts upon print differently and for different purposes" (p. 53). Her research project, however, included only a survey and interviews with women readers; she did not study social interaction in groups of women.

Interpretive communities of fiction readers were also analyzed in Marcy Dorfman's (1996) study of short story interpretations. She compared the interpretive strategies of two types of readers: graduate students who were literary experts because they were majoring in English Literature in a British university, and undergraduate students in the same university who were literary novices because they were majoring in a technical field of study. The participants read short stories in three genres: (a) science fiction; (b) modern British fiction; and (c) postmodern fiction. Interpretive strategies in each group of students were the same, as the literary experts found the literary fiction (b & c) most interesting, and the literary novices preferred reading the science fiction. The novices did not understand the literary fiction and did not interpret meaning

from the text, but the experts were willing to interpret meaning from it even though they did not completely understand it. Dorfman (1996) concluded that each category of students extracted meaning from the texts through a "similar filter" and the two groups' interpretations were based on pre-existing assumptions regarding how each type of text should be read (p. 456).

**Storytelling in Interpretive Communities**

Radway and Dorfman studied readers as interpretive communities, but other scholars have found that journalists who read *and* write stories share similar frames for interpretation. Professional journalists comprise interpretive communities because they extract meaning from news events through a similar filter and write similar stories (Berkowitz & TerKeurst, 1999; Robinson & DeShano, 2011; Zelizer, 1993). Zelizer (1993) began this line of inquiry by analyzing how journalists collectively covered two notorious events in U.S. history, McCarthyism and the Watergate scandal. This study highlighted the power of narratives as interpretation because storytelling as a practice created "certain constructions of reality" and "certain kinds of narratives" (Zelizer, 1993, p. 223). Her study concluded that the reporters' shared discourse and repetition of the same stories in the news continued to frame the events through the journalistic community's shared interpretation of reality. As with Radway's (1984a) readers, interpretation was influenced by expectations for storytelling norms that had developed over time in a community.

In another study of storytelling norms, Berkowitz and TerKeurst (1999) observed that local journalists and their sources constitute an interpretive community through shared meanings in ongoing relationships. This study focused on social interaction as a construction of reality regarding news events and found that journalism practices are characterized by "common modes of interpretation of their social world" (Berkowitz & TerKeurst, 1999, p. 127). The researchers

conducted field interviews with 17 journalists and news sources in the same Midwestern state and concluded that news sources shape journalistic interpretation by adhering to the preferred meanings of the social groups in that geographical community. The journalists allowed their news sources to shape their interpretation to established preferred meanings in order to preserve their media organization's economic survival in that community, and Radway's (1984a) readers chose to interpret storytelling in romance novels by adhering to the preferred meanings of their social group, women who were oppressed by patriarchy.

A new type of storyteller, the citizen journalist, joined the media when the digital age enabled local citizens with no reporting education or experience to publish reports of local events on their blogs. Robinson and DeShano (2011) investigated this trend by interviewing a group of citizen journalists and a group of professional journalists in Madison, Wisconsin. The citizen journalists comprised an informal interpretive community because they networked with one another and developed "their own constructions of reality" through storytelling about past conversations and experiences (Robinson & DeShano, 2011, p. 16). The bloggers valued storytelling more than factual reporting, but the professional journalists valued factual reporting more than storytelling. Each interpretive community, therefore, was characterized by shared value systems and practices, expectations for storytelling norms, and preferred meanings that had been shaped over time by the group.

**Media Consumers as Interpretive Communities**

Several media studies have examined television audiences as interpretative communities (see Lindlof, 2002 for a comprehensive review), but those studies have been criticized for their lack of historical, cultural and social context (Carragee, 1990). As Lindlof (2002) posited, geographically separated individuals who watch the same television show do not meet the

criteria for an interpretive community because: (a) they may not have common characteristics and values; (b) they may not share strategies for the interpretation of media; (c) they do not collectively create standards for etiquette in social interaction; and (d) they do not share a sense of unity by engaging in communicative practices which have been accepted in that group. Because my research study is an ethnography of a community that regularly engages in face-to-face group interaction to interpret media, I will review literature which directly relates to that category.

As the findings of previous studies have shown, the members of an interpretive community share common characteristics and interpretive strategies that unite them, and they collectively "do" membership through shared communicative practices that have been socially constructed by that group. In media studies of television audiences, viewers who gather regularly to watch new episodes of the same show or genre meet these criteria because they share an interest in that programming and collaboratively construct social norms for viewing behavior (e.g., Beck, 1995). For example, in Beck's (1995) ethnography of football fans who gathered weekly to watch televised games, seven male college students who met every Sunday in the common area of a college dormitory to watch New York Giants football games co-constructed their interpretations of the media content and marked their membership as insiders (and excluded other viewers in the room) using three interactional strategies: (a) expressing unconditional allegiance to their team; (b) displaying knowledge of shared terms and past talk in this group; and (b) speaking in a shared code, which the (female) author called "footballese" (for example, "TD" was a touchdown). Beck's (1995) study concluded that interpretation is a performative act that is based on competence and membership in an interpretive community, and norms for behavior in the group are established and maintained by its members. "The members'

'performance' or 'reading' of the mediated 'text' works to reinforce their own status as members of the particular community as well as to perpetuate the very nature of that community and of viewing television within that community" (Beck, 1995, p. 12). Beck concluded that watching visual media in a group creates a contextual frame for interpretation.

Religious individuals also share contextual frames for interpretation as they evaluate new media products that are part of contemporary culture. Bryan Taylor's (1999) ethnography of an interpretive community in a Mormon-owned bookstore found that interpretation is social and political. The flagship store for Mormon publisher and retailing giant Deseret Book sold books, books-on-cassette, music CDs and videos on two floors; an upper level of products for Mormons, and to boost its revenue, a lower level for the general public that included products that were considered controversial. As employees helped customers, they discussed their interpretations of the media and "did" their religious identity as "conservative," "liberal," or "fringe" Mormons (Taylor, 1999, p. 79). The study found that the bookstore reproduced norms for Mormon culture yet also encouraged independent thinking and religious interpretation because whenever Mormon customers asked questions about the controversial products, employees told them to decide for themselves. "Everybody's an individual," one of the store's employees said.

**Interpretative Conflict in Religious Communities**

Differences in opinion regarding how the Bible should be interpreted have caused argumentation and separation among Protestants, and this controversy has been high-profile in the evangelical community. Evangelicals have been broadly defined as individuals who believe that Jesus Christ was divine and one must have faith in order to be saved, but this definition of evangelicalism ignores the issue of inerrancy that has divided this category of Christians (Ammerman, 1982). Some evangelicals believe that the Bible should be interpreted literally

because it is literally true, but others believe that Scripture is inspired and should not be interpreted literally. For example, in a telephone survey of 158 evangelicals, Dixon, Jones and Lowery (1992) reported that 27 respondents interpreted the six-day creation in Genesis as literally true, 45 interpreted it as figurative, and the other 28 regarded the Bible as simply a book or a story. Therefore, in 1992 most evangelicals were non-literalists. Changes in lifestyles have also divided literalists from non-literalists, and as a result, differences in interpretation have resulted in a wide variety of religious beliefs and practices (Ammerman, 1982).

Southern Baptists also have been arguing who does and does not have the authority to interpret the Bible, and they have divided on this issue into literalist conservatives and non-literalist moderates. Literalist conservatives believe in special revelation, that everything the Bible says is true, all other religions are wrong, and only (male) pastors have the ability to interpret Scripture. Non-literalist moderates believe in general revelation, that anyone who studies the Bible in-depth – even (female) laypersons, historians, and literary critics – can interpret the literary genres in the Bible in new ways and be divinely inspired, and truth can be found in other religions (Barnhart, 1993). This "battle for the Bible" evolved into a gender war in 1988 when the Southern Baptist Convention in San Antonio voted to adopt the principle that the (male) pastor is "the authoritative leader of the church" (Barnhart, 1993, p. 132). The 1988 ruling excluded religious scholars and educated laypersons, and because women were in both groups, this resolution was akin to "the erecting of a sea wall of resistance against the swelling waters of female influence in Southern Baptist churches" (Barnhart, 1993, p. 133). Educated Christian women such as Beth Moore, who held a bachelor's degree in political science and was leading a weekly Bible study for women at First Baptist Church, her longtime church and a well-known megachurch in Houston, were becoming prominent in the community. With this change,

Beth Moore and other Southern Baptist women could be criticized by their peers for interpreting Scripture.

Bartkowski (1996) conducted a study that compared different interpretations of Scripture in Protestant Christian books. He investigated two controversial issues, wifely submission and corporal punishment, and found that authors interpreted wifely submission in terms of different meanings: the traditional view of obedience vs. a more egalitarian view that Christian marriage is an equal partnership in which the couple surrender their relationship to God. The issue of spanking and hitting children also evoked different interpretations from Christian authors, from a strict disciplinary policy to physically punish all signs of defiance in children to a more moderate approach of unconditional love backed by spanking as a last resort. All Christian authors supported their arguments with Bible verses, which shows the polysemous character of religious interpretation, that such texts can be interpreted differently. Bartkowski (1996) concluded that interpretations are based on biases and assumptions, and "the interpretive community … determines the 'ground rules' for scriptural interpretation" (p. 270). Small religious groups are therefore interpreting Scripture in remarkably different ways.

**Communication Practices in Small Religious Groups**

Communication practices in small religious groups typically include group prayer, reading from a sacred text, discussing religious concepts, and sharing thoughts and feelings and telling personal stories (Bielo, 2009; Day, 2005; Lawson, 2006; Searl, 1994; Wuthnow, 1994a, 1994b). Storytelling is "the connective tissue that holds small groups together" (Wuthnow, 1994a, p. 292). Stories that are told in a group are oral narratives, which Riessman (2008) defines as spoken communication in which "a speaker connects events into a sequence that is consequential for later action and for the meanings that the speaker wants listeners to take away

from the story" (p. 3). The speaker selects, organizes, connects, and evaluates events in a meaningful way for a specific audience (Riessman, 2008).

Many women tell personal stories in groups of other women (Lampert & Ervin-Tripp, 2006). The narratives that women tell other women are commonly "troubles talk," stories about personal problems (Tannen, 1990). Basow and Rubenfeld (2003) found that women share their problems in troubles talk to connect emotionally with other women and enhance interpersonal intimacy. Often such stories include indirect complaints in which the speaker expresses dissatisfaction about herself or someone or something that is not present, and indirect complaints increase solidarity in friendships (Boxer, 1993). In addition, narratives are oral performances that construct identity in interaction (Fabian, 1993). When Christian women tell personal stories to other women in a group, they are performing or "doing" identity in group interaction to present a positive image of self to others (Goffman, 1959). Self-identity is more than ethnicity, gender, and age in that one's identity is not fixed–it can change moment by moment due to discourses in society and interaction with others (Carbaugh, 1996). Women enhance their social identity and moral worth by performing identity according to social norms (Guendouzi, 2005).

In small religious groups, members share stories from their everyday lives to connect their personal experiences with their sacred beliefs and interpret their sacred text in practical ways (Bielo, 2009; Lawson, 2006; Molina-Markham, 2012; Searl, 1994; Todd, 2013; Wuthnow, 1994a). Stories of everyday life "make God's Word come alive" in the group communication (Searl, 1994, p. 115). Many of these stories are about common experiences to which others can relate, and the openness and emotional intimacy in this setting leads to more storytelling because it gives others "permission" to tell their story (Wuthnow, 1994b, p. 305). Storytelling in small religious groups enables the members to give examples of how they live their religion (McGuire,

2008). In lived religion, "the individual is able to experience, rather than simply think or believe in, the reality of her or his religious world" (McGuire, 2008, p. 13). Based on McGuire's (2008) emphasis on shared meanings and learned practices, I define religion in general terms as a set of beliefs, norms and practices that are associated with an organization that promotes moral values regarding human life and destiny and usually links them to a deity. Telling stories in small religious groups demonstrates applied knowledge of a sacred text such as the Bible by interpreting it "through the lens of everyday life" (Searl, 1994, p. 123). Stories validate opinions because no one can dispute one's personal experience, and because they are linked to sacred beliefs, they become models for future behavior and decisions by members in the group (Wuthnow, 1994a).

Storytelling is also salient in small religious groups because it performs identity, an individual's moral evaluation of self and where one belongs in her social and cultural world (Goffman, 1959). Stories preserve individuality within the small community by shaping each member's identity; as in group therapy, "people become their stories" (Wuthnow, 1994a, p. 301). In a five-year national study of small groups, ethnographers in nine states reported that storytelling transforms spirituality into a journey–each weekly story becomes a new episode of an ongoing narrative (Wuthnow, 1994a). Telling stories helps the members accomplish their primary goal of spiritual growth, which is to make progress on their spiritual path by learning more about their sacred text and applying it to their everyday lives. In small Christian groups, storytelling is a tradition (Braunstein, 2012).

**The Co-construction of Practical Theologies in Small Religious Groups**

Scholars who study small religious groups have focused on same-religion groups as opposed to interdenominational groups, and most studies did not analyze communication in these

groups. Researchers have studied small religious groups from sociological perspectives (Dowdy & McNamara, 1997; McGuire, 2008; Schneider, 1993), anthropological perspectives (Geertsma & Cummings, 2004), religious theory (Brown, 2006; Lawson, 2006; Lounsbury, 2014) and feminist critiques (Douglass & Kay, 1997; Duff, 1997; Griffith, 1997; Halbertal, 2002; Weathers, 1997). These studies and essays were based on research interviews and/or surveys, but they did not record or analyze actual group interaction from a communicative perspective.

In communicative studies of small religious groups, Boyarin (1989) studied the traditional practices of Orthodox Jews who gather as a group to read and study the Talmud, and other studies focused on Muslims who meet in a group to perform and interpret the Quran (Baker, 1993; Bowen, 1992; Lambek, 1990). Several studies have been conducted on prayer groups (Day, 2005; Griffith, 1997; Westfield, 2001), but those groups did not study a religious text such as the Talmud, Quran, or Bible. Despite the growing small group movement in Protestant and Catholic churches, few researchers have studied communication practices in small groups of Christians in the United States who gather to study the Bible (Bielo, 2009; Lawson, 2006; Searl, 1994; Wuthnow, 1994a). Small Christian study groups are "the most prolific type of small group in American society, with more than 30 million Protestants gathering every week for this distinct purpose" (Bielo, 2009, p. 3).

Sociologist James Bielo (2009) conducted an ethnographic study of 324 small Christian group meetings in Lansing, Michigan. To identify patterns of behavior in religious study groups, he observed mixed-sex and same-sex groups in six Protestant congregations from four denominations (United Methodist, Lutheran, Restoration Movement, and Vineyard Fellowship). His book, *Words upon the Word: An Ethnography of Evangelical Group Bible Study*, analyzed Bible study as a social institution that is historically rooted in religion and is a site for building

relationships and consensus using social diplomacy. According to his discourse analysis, the participants in his study performed their identities and culture by following social norms for talk, but same-sex groups used different interactive frames to cultivate intimacy. Small groups of men primarily discussed and debated literal versus loose interpretations of sacred text, whereas small groups of women told narratives which cultivated emotional intimacy while learning about sacred text.

Robert Wuthnow (1994b) also visited a women-only Bible study, and because the group met on Wednesday mornings, he named it the "Wednesday Women's Group" (p. 127). This small group of women met in a small church in a suburb at a time which was convenient for mothers, 9:30 a.m., because their children were in school. Their meetings had a structural pattern: after 15 minutes of chatting, there were 30 minutes of prayer requests/praise items (needs for prayer and reports/stories of answered prayer, respectively) and prayer, and the meeting ended with 45 minutes of Bible study using a brochure as a study guide. The brochure included discussion questions, so talk in the group was oriented to the text in the brochure.

Natalie Searl (1994) conducted a nine-month ethnographic study of a women-only Bible study group as a qualitative part of Wuthnow's (1994b) five-year national study of small groups (published as a collection of essays in the book, "*I come away stronger*"). The (female) researcher analyzed group interaction among stay-at-home moms who met weekly to tell stories, pray together and study their sacred text in a country Baptist church. Communication in every meeting included Bible study, prayer and fellowship. Searl (1994) defined fellowship as "building relationships and providing encouragement" (p. 107). It was a spiritual and emotional support group where confidentiality was a priority because saying "Help" was the social norm (Searl, 1994, p. 121). Mentoring mothers was another important activity in the group, which

Searl characterized as an extended family. For example, a grandmother in the group who often gave rides to young mothers said to the researcher: "They all call me Mom" (Searl, 1994, p. 112). In addition to teaching Christian culture, this group gave mothers a break from being a mom by giving them an opportunity to "unwind" from "the hectic world" (Searl, 1994, p. 102).

The only other study of a women-only Bible study group was Lawson's (2006) case study of a Tuesday afternoon group that met regularly for 40 years. This grass-roots group began as a women's prayer group and evolved into a women's Bible study that includes a study guide with homework. Bonding in this group through sharing good and bad life experiences kept the members together for decades; the women interviewed had been in the group for 20-40 years. Their meetings were held in a living room in a house, and they were structured in three parts: (a) sharing time; (b) prayer time; and (c) Bible study. Lawson reported that the latter, however, proceeded slowly and was loosely structured. For example, if a member came to the meeting and told a story about a serious problem, the women spent the entire meeting time talking about her problem and postponed the planned Bible study until the next week. It functioned primarily as a "support network" for women whose families had scattered geographically (Lawson, 2006, p. 199). The members trusted one another, and they laughed and cried together. "It's something you really need," one member told the researcher.

In the United Kingdom, Andrew Todd (2013) was a short-term participant-observer in three Bible study groups that included storytelling in a relational group model. His ethnography and discourse analysis of turn-taking in conversations analyzed tensions between traditional and liberal interpretations of the Bible. After attending five or six meetings in each group, he concluded that these tensions can coexist peacefully because the groups were engaging in practical interpretations that were driven by relational concerns. Interpretations were "practical

theology" in that they were negotiated in turn-by-turn conversations, prioritized individual experience, and were cooperatively driven by the spirit of "fellowship" and learning in a group as opposed to a "quest for knowledge" (Todd, 2013, p. 70).

Several studies have found that the members of small religious groups are engaged in practical theology (Bielo, 2009; Lawson, 2006; Molina-Markham, 2012; Searl, 1994; Todd, 2013; Wuthnow, 1994a). I define *practical theology* as connecting one's personal experience with one's sacred beliefs for the purpose of individual interpretation that will be useful in one's daily life. Tickle (2008) calls this trend "ubiquitous theology" because it is a widespread phenomenon that is occurring in Christian communities everywhere (p. 134). Practical theology poses interesting questions for scholars who study communication and religion in the post-modern era. In an age of relativism and individualism where truth is shaped by personal experience, meanings are embedded in culture. Difference and tolerance have replaced the universal truths of the pre-modern and modern eras. In the realm of religious interpretation, practical theology applies the open-ended possibilities of post-modernism. These possibilities give Christian women the newfound freedom to interpret their sacred text in new ways. As I will explore in my later analysis, the leader of the small religious group that I studied pondered this trend as the group discussed the meaning of the word "submit" vis-à-vis marriage. "The thing that struck me about that section is, how many women were put off by that?" Darlene said. "How many other pieces of our Christian Bible would we choose to cut out of our life to make our life easier?" As the group leader pointed out, practical theology in Bible study has the potential to become a religious free-for-all where every individual has the autonomy to decide which parts of her religious doctrine to believe and which parts to reject or reinterpret.

The freedom to alter rather than accept traditional religious interpretations thus creates discursive spaces for new interpretations in small religious groups. However, these new possibilities also raise questions about how women are making sense of Scriptural texts that they may see as impractical or irrelevant in their daily lives. To what extent are they changing the meaning of their sacred text in order to fit in with a popular culture that advocates individualism and autonomy for women and/or make sense of their own embodied life experiences? Do the possibilities for various interpretations to co-exist in interdenominational WBS give women a "license" to disagree with whatever aspects of their religious doctrine are not easy or comfortable? If Christian doctrine is an island in an archipelago of world religions, is practical theology in WBS catalyzing waves of change that are eroding what soil still remains? The extent to which women are using this newfound authority to (re)interpret sacred text is not yet known.

More studies are needed to analyze face-to-face communication and interpretation in small religious groups that engage in practical theology. Previous studies have not focused on the new WBS format, which includes workbooks and videos. Mediated oral performances add a visual, interactive element to the meeting as women watch, listen, fill in the blanks in the workbook, take notes, and react with silence, laughter, or in some cases, by repeating a key phrase in unison as instructed by the speaker in the video. Before the video, the women discuss the readings and homework in the workbook, and after they watch the video, they discuss it as a group. The multi-modality of this group interaction–the interplay of text, talk and video–includes storytelling, so it may be a "space of ongoing reconfiguration" of meaning (ledema, 2007, p. 940). The complexity of this format gives the members of the group more resources for applying their religion to everyday life.

Methodologically, previous studies of women-only Bible study groups have not included detailed description and analysis of communicative practices such as prayer, fellowship, and oral narratives, all of which may be intertwined. Since storytelling is prevalent in small groups and is a longtime tradition in Christian groups, oral narratives in particular should be analyzed in terms of identity, as Elizabeth Molina-Markham (2012) did in her ethnography of communication. Molina-Markham analyzed lengthy narratives that were told during monthly community Quaker meetings which were held in a town hall to determine their role in the group's social interaction. She found that oral performances about life changes and conversion to the Quaker religion were sensemaking and identity construction, and the dynamics were interactional because this storytelling tradition was a joint accomplishment in a group. Her analysis unpacked the cultural premises of the community, its beliefs and values and ways of speaking, as a "membering process" that constructs community and teaches new members how to "do" identity in this group. This communicative process, socialization, needs to be studied in women's Bible study groups to generate new understanding of the social norms for group interaction and what face-to-face talk in this setting accomplishes for the participants.

Communication in small religious groups also requires literacy regarding the religion that is being practiced. Literacy is more than the ability to read and write; it is a social practice (Fabian, 1993). Reading text aloud in front of other people is an "oral performance" which has semantic, relational, and cultural aspects (Fabian, 1993, p. 90). Reading verbatim from text and reciting common prayers and stories from memory are historical social practices that have been used in religious communities for thousands of years, and this type of literacy has a "real presence" in religious communication (Fabian, 1993, p. 80). Narratives fit into the tradition of storytelling in small Christian groups (Braunstein, 2012). Storytelling in women's Bible studies

creates emotional intimacy, an atmosphere of camaraderie among learners (Bielo, 2009). In the group that I studied, the women told numerous narratives.

**Rationale and Research Questions**

I joined the women's group to conduct long-term research for the purpose of studying their communicative practices and how new meanings were being socially constructed. The group that I studied was an interpretive community that interpreted their religious text in non-traditional ways. Communication in this group was a significant topic for research because mediated WBS groups have become common yet use controversial learning materials in Protestant churches throughout the United States. Interpretive communities have been studied in academic and popular literature, where groups of individuals extract different meanings from the same text. Interpretation is a social and political activity that is controversial in American religion, particularly a Christian community fraught with argumentation regarding who is and is not allowed to interpret the Bible, so the participants in my study were an interesting research site.

This ethnographic fieldwork for my dissertation included 20 months of participant-observation, so it answers Lindlof's (2002) call for scholars to use long-term participant-observation to study interaction in interpretive communities, instead of simply analyzing the media they use or publish. Furthermore, studying the group's multimodal learning process contributes to studies that "deepen our understandings of specific faith communities and their interactions with media texts and technology" (Lindlof, 2002, p. 71). Surveys and telephone interviews have provided statistics for differences in religious beliefs, but ethnographic methods are necessary to study "scriptural interpretation in actual conservative Protestant communities" (Bartkowski, 1996, p. 269). My research study provides insight into how specific faith

communities are interpreting their religious text in contemporary society and how they are interacting with media and technology in that endeavor (Bartkowski, 1996).

The overarching theme for my dissertation is communication in an interpretive community. My research questions for this dissertation are:

**RQ#1a**. What are patterned ways of speaking in an electronically-enhanced women's Bible study group?

**RQ#1b**. How, as a group, do women in a women's Bible study relate the Bible, related texts (print and electronic), and Bible-study inspired stories to their everyday lives?

**RQ#1c**. In what ways, if any, does participation in an electronically-enhanced/mediated women's Bible study group alter or change the experience in a "traditional" Bible-only read study group?

**Preview of Chapters**

In the next chapter, I will describe my method and how I analyzed a large volume of data. Because my fieldwork was ethnography of communication, Chapter 3 is an analysis of the group's communicative practices that includes my narrative about being a longtime participant-observer in this small group and the context of this community. Delving into the interplay of talk, texts and technology, Chapter 4 is an analysis of the group's multimodal learning practices and how local interpretations socially constructed religion and membership in the group. Chapter 5 is the conclusion in which I reflect on my findings and provide future directions for studying interpretive communities.

# CHAPTER TWO:

# DATA AND METHOD

This chapter includes an overview of my ethnographic research that explains my research method, key terms, and objectives. It also contains my original plans for data collection and a discussion of my data analysis, my plans to analyze various forms of data that I collected. My personal story as an ethnographer and my detailed research process will be described in subsequent chapters because they are the results of my research study.

A variety of methods can be used to study language or culture, and for this study I used ethnography of communication (EC). It is a research method that can be used to analyze both language and culture. Using EC as method for collecting and analyzing my data enabled me to show how language practices are specific to culture and also how they create and perpetuate culture (Keating, 2001). This type of analysis was ideal for analyzing meaning-making in social interaction in an interpretive community because EC shows "the complexity of language and interpretation" (Keating, 2001, p. 294). Scholars who have specifically studied social interaction in small religious groups have also used EC (Bielo, 2009; Molina-Markham, 2012; Todd, 2013).

## Ethnography of Communication: An Overview

Developed by Dell Hymes (1974), EC began as "The Ethnography of Speaking," a 1962 paper that proposed a combination of ethnography, the description and analysis of culture, and linguistics, the description and analysis of language. The synthesis of ethnography and linguistics shows relationships between language and culture by analyzing patterns in ways of

speaking in a specific community (Hymes, 1972b). Analyzing patterned ways of speaking enables the researcher to describe and provide examples of a specific group's linguistic repertoire and how it relates to other aspects of its culture (Keating, 2001). In addition to identifying patterns of speech, EC analyzes the sociopolitical context of the community, the functions of language, and appropriateness as a factor in the talk which is influenced by context and understanding (Hymes, 1972a). A key aspect of EC is thus communicative competence, the ability to communicate appropriately within a specific community and how that cultural knowledge is learned through socialization (Hymes, 1972c).

Observing naturally-occurring communication in a specific cultural setting enables the researcher to analyze communicative practices – the patterns of situated talk – that are routinely enacted in a communicative scene (Carbaugh, Gibson & Milburn, 1997). A communicative scene is "communication on a specific occasion, as a situated performance" in a "system of expressive meaning" that "implicates basic beliefs and values" (Carbaugh et al., 1997, p. 6). EC studies require long-term fieldwork so the researcher can participate in and observe a group's cultural ways of speaking. Individuals perform membership in a group by talking in accordance with the norms for talk in that situated context, and studying the symbolic practices in a social scene enables the researcher to interpret the rules for talk, symbols for beliefs and values, and meanings that are constructed in communicative practices (Hymes, 1974). After observing a group's communicative practices, the EC researcher analyzes them by defining, describing and classifying categories or native taxonomies of speaking (Hymes, 1972b).

EC researchers study face-to-face interaction by gathering and analyzing data through participant-observation, audio-recordings, document collection and interviews (Blommaert & Jie, 2010). Participant-observation requires the researcher to join the group as a member and

inform the group of her purpose for being there (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Instead of simply observing a social group, participant-observers "become active and involved members of an existing group" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 3). They watch, interact, ask questions, collect documents, make audio recordings, and write reflections on their experiences (Lofland & Lofland, 2006). Participating in the group's conversations and activities gives the researcher insight into the "obligations, constraints, motivations, and emotions that its members experience as they complete their everyday activities" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 3). Long-term participant-observation gives the researcher an opportunity to experience firsthand a group's social world while learning and engaging in its communicative practices.

To provide a methodological framework for EC, Hymes developed the S-P-E-A-K-I-N-G model and specific terms for units of analysis. The S-P-E-A-K-I-N-G model (Hymes, 1972b) is a mnemonic guide for identifying and describing the following components of communication in a specific community:

S = the Setting and Scene,

P = the roles of the Participants,

E = the Ends or purposes, goals and outcomes,

A = the Act sequence, the structure in which activities are organized,

K = the Key, the emotional tone of the talk,

I = the Instrumentalities, the forms and channels of communication,

N = the Norms, the social rules for interaction in this situated context, and

G = the Genre, the type of speech event.

In addition, Hymes (1972b) specified the following EC terms as units of analysis: (a) speech community; (b) speech situation; (c) speech event; and (d) speech act. A *speech community* is a social group that shares "knowledge of rules for the conduct and interpretation of speech" (Hymes, 1972b, p. 49). In demonstrating this shared knowledge, they demonstrate membership in that community. A *speech situation* is the cultural gathering where they demonstrate membership in the community. Speech situations such as "ceremonies, fights, hunts, meals" and meetings are contexts for certain types of communication which have been established through socialization (Hymes, 1972b, p. 51). A *speech event* is a specific activity that takes place during a speech situation in a speech community that is "directly governed by rules or norms for the use of speech" (Hymes, 1972b, p. 52). For example, a conversation is a speech event that depending on the culture of the group may prescribe rigid turn-taking, as in formal meetings in a boardroom, or in several speakers talking at the same time, as in informal family dinners at home. A *speech act* is an utterance such as a request, command or question that follows a conventional norm for using words to perform an action (Austin, 1962/1975). For example, saying "Hello" when one answers the telephone initiates a conversation with the caller (Hymes, 1972b, p. 53). Several speech acts (jokes) can occur within a speech event (conversation) during a speech situation (meeting) within a speech community (the people who meet regularly).

Unlike other research methods, EC therefore allows the interdisciplinary communication researcher to study the relationships between language and culture in naturally-occurring social interaction and how the members of a specific group engage in meaning-making practices using communicative competence that is learned through socialization. EC therefore includes aspects

of anthropology (culture), linguistics (language), and sociology (socialization) in the study of communicative practices within a specific group.

Because planning an ethnographic study under the auspices of a university requires approval of research on human subjects, it was necessary to obtain approval from the university's Institutional Review Board.

**Obtaining Institutional Review Board Approval**

After conducting a pilot study, I submitted a research proposal to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of South Florida. I requested it to be approved via an expedited review because this study met the criteria for ethical research that involves human subjects. First, this required that I obtain a letter from the pastor of the church that granted me permission to attend all future meetings of the Thursday morning women's Bible study and audio-record all of the talk except prayers and prayer requests. Second, I stated that my dissertation and all other forms of my published research would contain only pseudonyms, not the real names of the participants, to protect their identities. Third, my proposal included an informed consent form that the participants could voluntarily sign and mail to me in a return self-addressed, stamped envelope (SASE), so no one would feel peer pressure to sign the form during the meeting. Fourth, women who did not want to participate in the study had the option of not signing and mailing the form, and they could remain members of the group as non-participants, assured that their privacy would be protected, because I would not include anything the non-participants said in my research. For these reasons, my research proposal was approved by the IRB. Next, I will explain my original plans to collect primary and secondary data.

**Data Collection**

I proposed to collect two kinds of data. Primary data would be based on my ethnographic

fieldwork, including interviews and fieldnotes, audio-recordings and transcripts of actual talk. Secondary data would include the media used to facilitate, augment, and complement face-to-face interaction, which in this study were Bibles, workbooks, videos, and handheld electronic Internet devices such as smart phones and iPads that enable users to access the Bible as e-text.

Fieldnotes are texts that researchers write to document and reflect upon their observations and experiences as they conduct ethnographic fieldwork (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). These textual artifacts describe and interpret talk, activities, and physical details of the setting. Collectively, fieldnotes provide a chronological record of the group's activities, the researcher's involvement in the group, and the researcher's understanding of the participants' experiences. To record observations accurately, it is important to write lengthy fieldnotes as soon as possible after each visit to the research site. I planned to type my fieldnotes as soon as possible after every meeting to preserve my experiences, feelings, and (initial) interpretations of that day's events at the research site.

My research proposal also included my plans to audio-record group interaction during the meetings with a digital recorder so I would have a complete and accurate word-by-word record of the actual talk, and I planned to transcribe conversations that were exemplars of the group's patterned ways of speaking. In addition, I thought it would be prudent to take detailed handwritten notes so I would have a record of the meeting if my digital audio-recorder failed to operate correctly. During my pilot study of the group, I saw that the participants watched a video during every meeting in which the author of the workbook elaborated on the learning material in that week's readings. As a full participant, I planned to engage in the group's routine practices of taking notes during these videos and filling in the blanks in the outline of the main points for that video in the workbook. Taking detailed notes would document my firsthand

experience as a participant and my observations of the other women reacting to the video. Therefore, my handwritten notes (primary data) would include content that was not documented in the workbook (secondary data) regarding the content of the videos and what happened in the group while they were watching the videos.

Therefore, this study would collect the following primary and secondary research. Primary data would include: (a) audio-recordings of group interaction during meetings; (b) complete transcripts of a sample of those meetings; (c) detailed handwritten notes that I would take during the meetings; (d) fieldnotes that I would type as soon as possible after the meetings; and (e) audio-recordings of interviews with the participants. Secondary data would include: (a) workbooks for pre-packaged contemporary electronically mediated women's Bible studies that the women used; (b) their sacred text, the Bible; (c) DVDs of the videos; (d) handheld Internet devices; and (e) relevant websites and blogs. Next, I will explain how I planned to analyze the data that I collected.

**Data Analysis**

My research objectives were to unpack the norms for talk in this speech community and speech events during the meeting that accomplished group membership and interpret meanings that were constructed in the group's face-to-face and mediated communicative practices so I could define, describe and classify categories as patterned ways of speaking (Hymes, 1972b).

To accomplish these objectives, I developed a three-step EC approach for analyzing excerpts of talk during the meetings. First, I would select excerpts of actual talk that were exemplars of the group's communication practices and analyze them line by line. In this first step, *line-by-line analysis*, I would define, describe, and analyze their language using the following transcription notation: (a) a period within parentheses (.) indicates a short pause; (b)

capitalized words (WOW) indicate loud talk; (c) italicized words (*His* miracle) indicate emphasis; and (d) brackets [laughter] indicate sounds. Based on what emerged from line by line analysis, I would then categorize *patterned ways of speaking* by identifying the group's social norms or rules for talk. Third, I would analyze *tensions and practical theology* amidst the dynamics of group interaction, how tensions influenced meaning-making and altered the group's theology in ways that were more practical in their daily lives.

Therefore, using EC as method and this three-step approach to analyze excerpts of talk, the next two chapters of analysis will provide a comprehensive portrait of the face-to-face and mediated communicative practices in this small religious group by showing how their language and practices created and perpetuated the group's social norms and culture (Keating, 2001). In the last chapter, the conclusion (Chapter 5), I will reflect on the effectiveness of this method.

# CHAPTER THREE:

# PARTICIPANT-OBSERVATION AND COMMUNICATIVE PRACTICES IN A WBS

This chapter begins by chronicling my personal story as a first-time ethnographer. After telling the story of how I entered the scene, managed the tensions of being a researcher, and became a member of the group, I then use elements of Hymes' (1972b) S-P-E-A-K-I-N-G model to analyze the situated context of and social norms for naturally-occurring social interaction that occurred in the mediated women's Bible study group. The third section of this chapter focuses on storytelling as a social norm and analyzes narratives told in this group that co-constructed new meanings and group membership among the participants.

## My Personal Story: Entering, Observing and Becoming Part of a WBS Group

EC begins when the researcher negotiates access to a research site. To accomplish this goal, I conducted an online search for a church near the university where I was working and studying. My search found a Protestant church that listed 24 Bible studies on its website, and three of them were women-only groups. I sent an email to the individual who was listed on the website as the Bible Studies Coordinator to request permission and a referral to one of the small groups. In that email, I introduced myself as a Christian woman from Michigan who was currently a Ph.D. student at a local university, and I explained that I needed to observe a few meetings of a group and write a paper about it for a graduate course in communication. I also expressed interest in one of the three groups for women because I had never been in a women-only Bible study and wondered how they differ from co-ed groups. In her email reply, Joy (all

names are pseudonyms) approved my request and recommended that I attend the next meeting of the Thursday morning women's group because she was a member of that group and they were scheduled to begin a new series the following day. Therefore, I did my "homework" and sought permission for access from the gatekeeper beforehand, which are important steps in gaining ethnographic access to a new research site (Tracy, 2013, p. 69).

Ethnographic studies of face-to-face social interaction can be challenging to conduct because recording actual talk for research purposes is "considered to be an intrusive measure" in society (Blommaert & Jie, 2010, p. 34). I therefore felt like an intruder the first time I visited the women's Bible study group, because I had a digital audio-recorder and intended to record as much of the meeting as possible. Even though I had permission from one of the church administrators to attend this meeting, I was nervous because I did not know if the other women in the group knew that a researcher would be present. If they did not know I was coming, was I "crashing" a private religious group like uninvited partygoers who show up at a wedding?

I went to the meeting on the first day of a 10-week series that was beginning in April 2013 based on a recommendation from Joy, the woman who coordinated small groups at this church. I had emailed her and requested a referral to a small group because I needed to attend a few of their meetings, participate in them, and ask the members a few questions for a term paper that I was writing for one of my graduate classes. I also explained to her that I was a Christian woman who lived near the church and that I had been a member of a Bible study before. "Joining the first session would be the best," Joy replied.

Talk in this specific setting intrigued me because several years ago I had been a member of a co-ed Bible study in another U.S. state where the men in the group dominated the discussion. The Bible study groups in that small Baptist church were co-ed; there were no

groups for women only. It seemed to me that talk in a women-only group might be different from that experience, and I wondered whether the generalizations in Bielo's (2009) study regarding gendered talk in small Evangelical Protestant groups in Michigan would be found in an interdenominational women's group in a different geographic region. Bielo found that men-only groups debated how to interpret their sacred text, but women-only groups told narratives that created emotional intimacy. Furthermore, I was intrigued by the institutional setting. A religious setting constrains what can and cannot be said; I wondered how talk or topics here might be constrained.

Based on my past experience as a member of a Bible study, I thought that I would be comfortable joining this women's Bible study, and I predicted that my research would proceed according to my plan. However, as Blommaert and Jie (2010) point out, "everyday life will never adjust to your research plan" so adaptation was necessary when conducting this ethnography of communication in the field (p. 1).

**The awkward intrusion**

The church was a small one-story structure with a peaked roof that was tucked into a grove of tall Cypress trees. It looked like a motel in a tropical resort because it was lushly landscaped and a wall of clear, floor-to-ceiling windows faced the paved parking lot. I asked a tall, older man in the sanctuary for directions to the Thursday morning women's Bible study, and he led me to the front office and repeated my request to the church's secretary. She led me down a hallway and into a courtyard that connected the main building to the education building, a much larger brick ranch-style structure behind the church that resembled an elementary school.

After the church secretary led me to the classroom, I was alone in the room. On the table I saw a signup sheet, a wicker basket, and a stack of workbooks for Beth Moore's "To Live Is

Christ" WBS. I sat down at the table, opened the workbook, and began flipping through the pages. Three women arrived at the same time and walked into the room, talking in a very friendly way, as if they were old friends. One by one they greeted me warmly and introduced themselves. What a *relief*, I thought. The last thing I wanted to do was intrude on a small group of people if they didn't want me there.

More women entered the room, one at a time, and greeted each other. They smiled as they noticed me, and the ones that were close to where I was sitting said hello. The woman who coordinates the small groups at this church, Joy, walked over to me and introduced herself. I had emailed her and obtained her permission to be here, so I stood up and thanked her for letting me come. She asked me in a guarded tone of voice, "Are you just joining us for *today*?" "*No*," I said, "I want to *keep* coming." She smiled and visibly relaxed. "That's great!" she said. "This is the first day of a new 10-week Beth Moore program."

At that point, I noticed that the other women were putting cash into the wicker basket by the signup sheet. I wondered why and figured out that everyone was supposed to pay for the workbook. I asked how much the workbook cost and spent the next few minutes apologizing that I didn't have $15 in cash to put in the basket; I even opened my wallet to show Joy that it only contained $6. "I just don't pay for anything using cash anymore," I said, realizing that for the first time. "I pay for everything with a credit card." Joy smiled and said it would be okay for me to pay the $15 during the next meeting.

Everything was going well until I told Joy that I wouldn't be able to attend the next meeting because my aunt and uncle from Michigan would be visiting me. She tilted her head and looked away, which I interpreted as suspicion that I was making up an excuse to never return. I felt like I had to say more about my aunt and uncle in order to convince her that I was

being honest; I was not a researcher who was merely saying that she would join the group but secretly planned to never return. I told Joy that my aunt and uncle know that my parents are both "gone," and my aunt and uncle call me regularly to tell me that they are proud of me and that they are praying for me. "I haven't seen them in over 10 years," I explained, "and they are coming to Florida to see their daughter, my cousin, so I'm going to get to see my aunt, my uncle, and my cousin for the first time in a long, long time." Joy smiled again. "Well, I'm doubly excited," she said, "because I'm excited that you're here, and I'm excited that you're not just here for today, that you're going to keep coming."

Darlene asked me if there was anything special that I needed them to do, and I showed her the list of the questions that I wanted to ask them at the end of the meeting which would reflect on how they communicated as a group. She asked me if they had to write anything like a questionnaire or if I would ask the questions aloud. I said that I would read the questions aloud and record their answers as they gave them as a group. Then my heart pounded in my chest as I asked for her permission to record the entire meeting. I was nervous because: (a) the ethical aspects of recording a religious meeting where people reveal their personal problems and fears was what concerned me most about this project; and (b) I was afraid that she would say "no" and then I would not be able to write a good term paper because I would not have much actual discourse to analyze. "So I would like to record their answers to my questions at the end, and if it's okay, I would also like to record the meeting, too … but if that's not okay, I can just record their answers at the end." Darlene looked off into the distance as she thought about these options. I waited silently and hopefully. "I don't think you should record the prayer requests," she said thoughtfully. "Those are really personal. But you can record the meeting."

**Breaking the ice with the group**

When the meeting began, the group leader explained the context of this new 10-week study and announced my presence and that I was here in a research role but also to join the group. "So we're *not* just guinea pigs," Darlene joked. That remark made me see myself from a different perspective. A researcher can be seen by research subjects as an observer, a stranger who is only there to watch them like an animal in a maze and write a report that will further the researcher's academic career. I had to differentiate myself as a full participant. "Yes," I said, "I will record everything that happens today and that will go into my paper, except for the prayer time, of course, and then next week I'm having company so I won't be able to come, but for the rest of the 10 weeks, I'll be here to participate." As I looked around the room, their smiling faces indicated that the women had relaxed. The fact that I was joining them *long-term* made this intrusion okay. For the rest of the meeting, I felt socially accepted as a participant who was welcome to stay in the group.

After the leader announced to the group that I would be recording their talk, however, I saw them react with nervous and concerned facial expressions, so I decided to tell them that I would not record any of their future meetings, because I did not want to inhibit their interaction in future meetings. That relieved them, but it was a disappointing development for me as a researcher, because it meant that I would have to take notes by hand during future meetings and would not have recordings to transcribe after future meetings. When I began audio-recording the conversation during the first meeting, I encountered the "observer's effect" (Blommaert & Jie, 2010, p. 27) when I noticed that their talk became noticeably less casual and relaxed than immediately before I started my digital recorder.

At the end of the meeting, Darlene explained that I would be asking them a few questions so I could write a college paper. She also said that the women's responses to my questions were voluntary; they should only answer my questions if they wanted to do so. I conducted a group interview with the women by asking them questions and audio-recording their responses. Overall, the first meeting that I attended was not a comfortable encounter for me as a first-time ethnographer. I suspected that it was also uncomfortable for some of the participants because I recorded the entire meeting, and when I could not attend the second meeting of that series, I hoped that my absence that week would be opportunity for them to relax. Two weeks later when I attended the meeting, we were all much more relaxed and outspoken, and I attributed that change to the fact that I was a participant observer who was no longer recording the talk.

Preparing for the second meeting that I attended and participating in the group during that meeting gave me an opportunity to experience the WBS learning process. Before the meeting, I read five reading assignments and completed five days of homework assignments in the workbook for that series, Beth Moore's (1997) "To Live Is Christ: The Life and Ministry of Paul." Instead of simply reading assigned pages in the Bible, as I had done prior to each meeting of the traditional Bible study in which I had been a member years earlier, I read the beginning of Beth Moore's story of how Paul converted to Christianity and helped lead that religious movement. During the reading process, I looked up relevant Bible verses to answer homework questions regarding the context of those historical events, and the homework also required writing my interpretations of the meaning and significance of specific Bible verses on blank lines in the workbook. The reading and homework assignments for this type of Bible study meeting were much more engaging than simply reading assigned verses because I was actively responding to the texts by writing my thoughts in the workbook. The workbook provided added

value to my learning experience by requiring me to interact with the text instead of simply reading it.

When I attended the second meeting, I observed and participated in the group discussion of the readings and homework during the first hour and then watched and discussed the video during the second hour. As we watched the video together, Beth Moore periodically said, "Somebody say" and then said a key phrase in her lesson plan. Whenever she did this, the key phrase suddenly appeared in text at the bottom of the video screen, and her studio audience and the women in the local group immediately repeated the key phrase in unison. At first I was startled by this practice so I remained silent during the recitations, but the other women seemed to enjoy it, so I responded accordingly. Reciting in unison gave me a sense of unity with the women in Beth Moore's studio audience and the women in this local group. It felt like we were interacting with the speaker in the video in our classroom, and because she told stories and jokes, it was like watching a television show together. Altogether, the workbook, recitations and digital media added value to the learning process by making it more interactive and engaging.

After attending two meetings, I wrote my college paper based on my handwritten notes and the group interview. I continued to attend the meetings because: (a) the women had invited me to join the group on a long-term basis; (b) I enjoyed the multimodal learning process; and (c) this project had the potential to evolve into fieldwork for my dissertation. At the end of the third meeting that I attended, a point when I felt that I had earned their trust, I obtained the group's (verbal) permission to audio-record talk during future meetings. My recordings, however, did not include prayers and prayer requests, because that was Darlene's condition for allowing me to record their talk. Having been a member of a traditional Bible study in Michigan years ago, I knew that prayers and prayer requests are typically highly personal talk about pain and suffering,

so I understood this condition and found it acceptable. My audio-recorded data therefore includes all conversations other than the opening and closing prayers and the prayer requests which preceded the closing prayer.

By this time I had discovered that this small religious group functioned as a support group. Reflecting on it as a research site, I concluded that this fieldwork would be beneficial for me professionally and personally, because I needed a social support group to cope with the demands of a doctoral program in a city far from home. I continued to attend meetings, and during the third meeting that I attended, the group agreed that it was okay for me to record all future meetings because I promised to substitute pseudonyms for their real names when I wrote my dissertation. "Do we get to pick our own pseudonyms?" Joy asked, and the room erupted in laughter as the women joked about choosing the names of famous people (celebrities such as Kim Kardashian) as pseudonyms for their identities in my project. At that point, I felt like I had gained the group's trust.

I also had to trust them. To participate in their discussions, I had to share my personal feelings, stories, and opinions. I could not sit on the sidelines and objectively watch, listen and take notes. As a participant, I felt vulnerable when I told them my personal stories about religion, family, motherhood, hardship, and forgiveness. Sharing my own negative experiences was not easy in a group of women I had recently met, but they shared their personal stories, too, and narratives cultivated intimacy in the group (Bielo, 2008). Therefore, to be a participant-observer in this group during this 20-month ethnography from April 2013 to December 2014, I had to be what Behar (1996) calls a vulnerable observer (Bohannan, 1966; Rabinow, 1977).

**Obtaining informed consent forms**

After I obtained approval for this ethnographic study from the university's Institutional

Review Board, I explained my research procedures to the women in the group and distributed the informed consent forms and self-addressed-stamped envelopes (SASEs) to them during the meeting. Each woman had the option of signing and returning the form to me or declining to participate in the study. Thirteen of the 15 women, most of whom were longtime members of the group, signed and returned the form to me with three weeks. Only the two newcomers did not return a signed form, and I think that may have been an unfortunate misunderstanding. As ESL members, they may not have understood the English word "pseudonym" and thought I would publish their actual names in my book. Their non-participation was not an issue, however, because both women left the group within a few weeks; one of them developed a serious personal illness, and the other left the group to cope with a family member's serious illness. In addition, whenever a new woman visited the group, I talked to her one-on-one, introduced myself as a researcher, explained my procedures, and gave her a consent form and a SASE. I received signed forms from all other newcomers in the mail. Therefore, all of the women who are quoted in this dissertation signed the informed consent forms voluntarily and independently because they wanted to participate in this study, and their identities have been protected by substituting pseudonyms for their actual names.

Joining this group therefore required a long-term commitment to be a full participant, but it also provided opportunities to participate in a social support group and gather a large volume of ethnographic data that I could analyze for my dissertation. Next, I will analyze the context of and social norms for interaction in this group.

**What is Going on Here? The S-P-E-A-K-I-N-G Model of Analysis**

The method selected for analyzing ethnographic observations as communicative practices is Hymes (1972) S-P-E-A-K-I-N-G model, eight steps that systematically describe and compare

the components of talk within a specific social context. This comprehensive model includes describing the setting and scene (S) using thick description (Geertz, 1973), analyzing the participants (P) and the ends (E) or purposes, goal, and outcomes of their interaction, chronicling the act sequence (A) of the talk, the key (K) or emotional tone of that talk, the instrumentalities (I) used, including the channels and forms communication, the norms (N) or social rules for talk, and the genre (G) of talk in this speech community. In this chapter, I will follow Molina-Markham's (2012) method of utilizing only the most salient elements of this model to create a canvas, a foundation for a portrait of communicative practices in this group. Beginning with a description of the setting and the participants, I will then focus on Hymes' concept of act sequence and will analyze how norms for talk enabled the participants to display communicative competence as members of the group. After describing the context (setting and participants) and the structure of the talk (act sequence) and analyzing the group's typical ways of speaking (norms) in Chapter 3, I will explore instrumentalities in Chapter 4 to develop the portrait with analysis of the interplay of talk, text and video in the group's multimodal learning process.

**Setting and scene: Physical environment and cultural occasion**

The Thursday morning meetings were held in 30-by-30-foot-square classroom with rich dark green carpet, cheerful light yellow walls, seven white conference-style tables, and 14 red upholstered chairs. Six of the tables were arranged in a rectangular pattern in the center of the room and the chairs were evenly spaced around the outside of this rectangle, so when the participants were sitting down, they faced each other and had a surface on which to write. At one end of the room was a tall, narrow window, and on sunny mornings, warm rays of sunlight shone in through the vertical blinds on this window. Next to the window was mounted an older 28-inch television, and underneath it was a DVD player. The WBS videos were on digital video

disks (DVDs), and each week we watched one of the videos on this television and took notes in our workbooks using the tables as desks.

The classroom was in the quiet wing of the education building in a hallway where no other rooms were being used on Thursday mornings, so the atmosphere in the meeting room was peaceful. Darlene arrived early, propped the classroom door open before the meeting, and left it open for the women who might arrive late, but she always closed the door during the second half of the meeting while we were watching the video so the noise – the speaker's voice, our laughter, and our responses in unison – would not disrupt any of the other classrooms. The other wings were boisterous because those classrooms were used as a day care and a charter school. The education building was a busy place, and during the meeting break and after the meeting, the main hallway was transformed into a heartwarming Norman Rockwell-ish scene as teachers carefully herded children down the hall in a long, single-file line.

Going to the meeting every week was a serene escape from the city because the church owned several acres of undeveloped land in a forest where a small portion of tall Cypress trees had been cleared for construction. As I drove into the property on the private winding road, I saw a large pond that was surrounded by forest on one side and manicured green lawn on the other side. I eventually learned that beyond the church property, hidden behind the tall trees, was an upscale subdivision of expensive homes, and many of the women in the Bible study group lived in this neighborhood. Curiosity motivated me to drive through it slowly one day, even though I felt somewhat like a spy. The main road was a scenic winding boulevard that was the main artery for several housing developments, and each housing development had its own large ornate name sign, pond, and large fountain as the centerpiece of the pond. The houses in these developments were huge two-story homes that had in-ground backyard pools which were

enclosed in glass atriums. It was a self-contained community where the residents could meet in an elegant centrally-located clubhouse, enroll their children in a public elementary school or the charter school at the church, and shop in an upscale retail strip mall that included a supermarket and pharmacy, a bank branch, a dry cleaners, and several shops and restaurants. I concluded that the women who lived in this neighborhood were upper income and realized that their membership in our group was convenient geographically and supplemented their religious and local identities because they were members of three interrelated communities: (a) our WBS; (b) the church where the meetings were held; and (c) the exclusive neighborhood behind the church.

Geographical aspects of the physical setting therefore influenced membership in the WBS as a scene or cultural occasion because women who lived near the church or visited the church were invited by members of the WBS/church to join the Thursday morning WBS. Joy was particularly adept at recruiting new women because she was the coordinator for all Bible studies at this church, so newcomers were referred to her, and she recommended the WBS of which she was a member. Women who accepted that invitation joined a religious network in which everyone (including myself) was encouraged to volunteer on committees to contribute to this church's internal and outreach programs. By joining the WBS and volunteering for this church, the women met other Christians, many of whom were women. The women often talked about their volunteer activities for the church, so it was obvious that they also saw one another while participating in those activities. Christian fellowship – social interaction with spiritual peers in a community where everyone participates by giving and receiving – was an important benefit of joining these interrelated communities.

**Participants: Characteristics and roles**

The number of women who attended the WBS meetings varied every week. There was a

low level of turnover as a few women stopped attending and other women replaced them, but the group ranged from 12 to 16 women (including myself, the researcher). The women were adult Christians between the ages of 18 to 65 years old who talked about the U.S. state or foreign country where they were born, and the group was ethnically diverse in that it included women of White, Hispanic, and African American heritage during my study. Based on their appearances and on the narratives they told about children and grandchildren, I estimated that Joy, the Bible study coordinator, was probably in her forties, Darlene, the group leader, was in her thirties, and the ages of the other women ranged from late twenties to sixties.

The two Hispanic women who were in the group when I first joined were immigrants, and they told narratives about loneliness when they first moved to America with their husbands. One of them went through eight long years of having to work at night as a server in a diner for minimum wage, so she struggled with loneliness and poverty, and the other woman said that she was taking care of two young children while her husband traveled every week for his job. Both women missed their families in their home countries and said that back home, they were constantly surrounded by immediate and extended family. Loneliness, culture shock, and the language barrier made these women miserable, and suffering through those hardships made them appreciate the company of other Christian women in this Bible study group.

From a relationship perspective, most of the women who were in the group during the spring 2013 semester when I joined them for Beth Moore's "To Live Is Christ" WBS also had been participants in the previous 10-week series that this group had completed, Priscilla Shirer's "One in a Million" WBS. Most of the women therefore knew each other, but there were a few other new members, so I didn't feel like the only newcomer. The women who had been longtime members were very welcoming to all of the newcomers. They smiled at them before

and during the meeting, and during the break and after the meeting, they chatted one-on-one with them to learn more about their lives and families.

At the end of my first semester in the group, the regulars who attended almost every meeting included (all first names are pseudonyms):

1. Darlene, group leader, a married mother and K-12 substitute teacher (White)
2. Joy, a married mother who worked at this church as the Bible studies coordinator (White)
3. Karen, a retired, married Catholic grandmother (White)
4. Denise, a married stay-at-home mother (White)
5. Jane, a married stay-at-home mother (White)
6. Melanie, a married mother and nurse (White)
7. Virginia, a divorced mother who owned her own business (White)
8. Sheila, a divorced mother and business owner who commuted an hour to this meeting (White)
9. Myself, Nancie, a divorced Ph.D. student who was also teaching college classes and was a stepmother years ago when I was married (White)

Over time, some of the group members stopped attending for various reasons, including health problems, family vacations, new jobs, or relocating to another state. Other women replaced them, and the following newcomers to the group also are quoted in excerpts:

10. Elizabeth, a married retired grandmother (White)
11. Anne, a married stay-at-home mother, who had just moved to Tampa because her executive husband had to relocate often for his career (White)
12. Laura, a married stay-at-home mother who volunteered for this church (White)

Two of the women, Darlene and Joy, had leadership roles. The group leader, Darlene, moderated the talk and kept the discussion focused on the homework and topics that related to that week's lesson; whenever the conversation strayed, she redirected us back to the original topic or question. The Bible studies coordinator at this church, Joy, was a spokesperson for the church. The members of the group looked at Joy and asked her questions about church events and policies, and she provided that information (e.g., "Is the church still paying for babysitters?" "Yes.") Joy also spoke on behalf of the pastor at this church. She cited his name whenever the church's authority was needed (e.g., "Well, Pastor Dave said …"). Joy was also Darlene's go-to substitute for group leader whenever Darlene was ill or Darlene's social activities conflicted with the Thursday morning meeting. Darlene and Joy had been close personal friends for more than 10 years, and there were other friendships apparent in the group; for example, two of the women, Karen and Cathy, always sat next to each other and talked about how they golfed together in a women's league.

The group's membership changed whenever new members joined and existing members left for various reasons, but overall, most of the participants attended the weekly meetings regularly. Coming to the meeting every week was important, Denise told me one day while we were chatting after a meeting, for two reasons: continuity in the current series and to keep the group going.

**Act sequence: Structure of the meetings**

When I joined this women-only Bible study group in 2013, I discovered that the format for women-only Bible study groups is dramatically different from the traditional co-ed Bible study I had attended in my small Baptist church in Michigan in 2006. Whereas the traditional

co-ed Bible study required only bringing one's Bible, taking turns reading verses, and discussing them in a group, Beth Moore's mediated WBS format was as demanding and time-consuming as a college course. The learning process was very labor-intensive. Each week, the women were expected to complete four to five hours of readings and homework assignments in a workbook and take notes in the workbook while watching a 50-minute video.

The Thursday morning meetings began with casual social interaction before the meeting, became structured and ritualistic interaction during the meeting, and concluded with casual social interaction after the meeting before the participants left the classroom. As is traditional for Bible study groups, the meeting began and ended with a group prayer. The prayer at the beginning of the meeting was an introduction prayer that asked God to guide the conversation and help the women learn and grow as Christians, and the prayer at the end of the meeting was a conclusion prayer that thanked God for His blessings and gave the group closure. Immediately before the conclusion prayer, the group leader asked for prayer requests. One by one, the women said their prayer requests, which could take one of two forms: (1) a need for prayer for oneself or a loved one and a brief description of the negative circumstances; and/or (2) praise to God for answering a prayer or because things are going well in one's life or the life of a loved one. The prayer request ritual was an important opportunity to share personal feelings and evoked emotionally supportive responses from the group. Most of the women wrote down everyone's prayer requests and (talked about how they) prayed for them every day during the week between meetings, but that was not required.

The majority of the meeting was divided into two parts. First, the participants opened their workbooks to the homework for this week's lesson and the group leader asked for volunteers to answer the questions and share their personal reflections. This part of the session

was similar to a graduate student seminar, where participants gather to discuss the readings for that week, except the topics in this group were religion, family, joy, and suffering. The group leader asked the women to share their homework answers during the meeting, but she stated that these personal stories were to be shared on a voluntary basis; no one expected you to share a personal story that you did not feel comfortable sharing with the group. After that 45-minute discussion, the group took a five-minute break.

As in graduate student seminars, the members were very knowledgeable about the topics that were discussed. Most of the women had read all or most of the Bible, and often during group discussions, they recited relevant Bible verses that they had memorized and even cited the source, the name of the book in the Bible and the numbers of the chapter and verse within that book (e.g., "And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love" NIV 1 Corinthians: 13: 13"). These recitations from memory reminded me of graduate students who cite sources and quotations from academic texts during discussions in graduate courses to contribute to the conversation and/or impress the professor and other students. In both learning environments, reciting text from memory increases social worth because it garners admiration and respect from others; hence, the speaker is valued as a knowledgeable member of the group.

In another example of knowledge as social worth, the women cited the names of Christian books, movies, and videos that I had never heard of but other women had read or seen. For example, while we were studying Beth Moore's "Esther" WBS, one of the women talked about a Christian movie, "One Night with the King," that portrays the dramatic biblical story of Esther, a Jewish orphan who became queen of Persia and saved the Jewish people from genocide by risking her own life. By broadening the scope of the resources that were being used for discussion and/or application of religious concepts, these women were demonstrating previous

knowledge of beliefs and practices and how they have been framed in Christian media. Education is highly valued in middle-class culture and among Protestants (Bielo, 2009; Dixon et al., 1992; Radway, 1984a), so bringing other resources into the discussion was an activity that was admired and respected in this community.

During the 11:00 a.m. meeting break as the women were using the restroom down the hallway or chatting in their chairs, the group leader cued up the video for that week's lesson on the DVD player that was mounted under the old TV. As we watched the video, the participants took notes and filled in the key words that were missing in the outlines in their workbooks. Each outline summarized the main points of the video-recorded lecture/sermon. For example, one of the main points in one video was, "The word _____ means learner, student" and the answer that we wrote in the blank was "disciple" (TLIC, 1997, p. 51). Each completed sentence (main point) was also shown for 10 seconds during the video so the viewers could see and hear the missing word(s), which made filling them in easier. Therefore, during the first hour of the meeting, the participants gave oral performances, and during the second part of the meeting, the participants watched a mediated oral performance that elaborated on that week's readings.

Learning the act sequence in this group's interaction helped me feel more comfortable and more confident and assimilate into this group over time. Yet as a researcher, I was surprised during every meeting as I continuously learned how to communicate in this group according to unwritten expectations for oral performances that had developed over time.

**Norms: Implicit social rules for talk**

Participating in these meetings required communicative competence (Hymes, 1972c), knowledge regarding what could and should be said. A new member of any group is tasked with learning unwritten shared understandings of which types of language are appropriate in that

setting. The women in the WBS group demonstrated their communicative competence by engaging in interaction as expected and by incorporating Biblical terms into their conversation. For example, the mediated speaker, Beth Moore, used "Amen" as a tag question in her video-recorded performances to signal a request for agreement from her audience(s). Whereas most people would say "right?" at the end of a sentence, she often said, "Amen?" Whenever she said this, the women in her studio audience and in our group laughed.

Scriptural metaphors were another aspect of communicative competence because they were common in the videos and in face-to-face communication during the meetings. For example, one of the women referred to God as the "potter" in our lives, which is a metaphor for the Christian belief that God is the ultimate authority in our lives who shapes us spiritually because he is the potter and we are the clay (NIV, Isaiah 64:8). Another woman used the image of the desert as a metaphor for suffering in contemporary life, which was a Biblical reference to the 40 years that the Israelites suffered while wandering around the desert (NIV, Numbers 32:13). While reflecting on the mediated lesson that we had just watched on the videotape that day, she shared her personal fears and tempered her reflection of the Beth Moore video using humor: "Like, Lord, make me *teachable* so I don't have to go through the *desert*, you know, to learn my lesson. If there's something that I need to learn, please be *gentle*, Lord." The group laughed, which indicated that they understood that the word "*desert*" was being used as a Scriptural metaphor. After the group laughed, the speaker continued: "So it's okay. You see? *She* prays just like that, too, so she must be scared of the desert, too." The group laughed heartily at the thought of the famous Beth Moore being afraid of the desert.

Metaphors that were based on Scripture were an important aspect of communicative competence in this group because if a new participant had been unfamiliar with the Bible, she

would not have understood these Biblical references and thus would not have understood the jokes. The speaker was performing her identity as a Christian who has read the Bible, believes that God is in control of her life and uses hardship to teach her lessons, and prays for her life to be easier ("please be *gentle*"). When she repeated a previous prayer ("Lord"), she quoted herself, so it was reported speech. This made her Scriptural metaphor even more powerful, because it was communication from herself to God that occurred during a sacred ritual. In addition, the joke about asking God to make her "*teachable*" conformed to the group's primary objective for attending these meetings, to learn more about their religion in a community of women who shared their religious beliefs.

I did not, however, understand all of the terms that the women used. For example, one of the women used a phrase that I had never heard before while discussing the homework for the "Gideon" series during the summer of 2013. Joy was talking about the importance of encouraging one another in our faith and telling people that they did a good job on the last mission trip or church activity. She talked about the importance of prayer to help us through the dark times of fear and insecurity, and she used the term "arrow prayer." After she finished making her point, I asked her what that term means. The other women smiled and laughed, which gave me the impression that they understood. An arrow prayer is what you do when you pray about something that is urgent. You are asking God to help you <u>now</u>! "Imagine that you are shooting an arrow up to heaven," Joy said. I had been in this group for four months, and I was still learning new terms.

Whenever the women in the group were reading an excerpt from the Bible or the workbook, and whenever Beth Moore or another WBS author read from the Bible during the videos, they read in a serious, ministerial tone of voice with inflection and stern facial

expressions that indicated reverence for Scripture and for God. When the women told personal narratives about struggle and hardship, their tone of voice and facial expressions indicated vulnerability, and the other women reacted with concern, understanding, and social acceptance. When the conversation was less serious, however, the women made humorous comments that were similar to Beth Moore's self-derogatory humor about herself or heartwarming humor about her family. Communicative competence in this small religious group included a high priority on learning, familiarity with Scripture, serious reverence for religious beliefs, relational fellowship between Christian women, and humor that was appropriate because it was not derogatory toward others in the group or offensive to Christians or to women.

**Storytelling as a Social Norm**

In terms of specific communicative practices, one of the most prevalent norms in the group was storytelling. Many scholars have used ethnography of communication to analyze how narratives about shared topics function as a process of "membering" individuals within a group (Braunstein, 2012; Carbaugh, 1996; Carey, 1989; Lampert & Ervin-Tripp, 2006; Molina-Markham, 2012; Todd, 2013; Witteborn & Sprain, 2009). In the next section, I will analyze storytelling as an opportunity for the participants in the women's Bible study to give oral performances that demonstrated communicative competence (Hymes, 1972c) by adhering to the shared topics of religion, motherhood and lack of time, and I will explain how storytelling "membered" the participants through shared practices and identity.

The women told stories in response to icebreaker questions at the beginning of the meeting when prompted by the group leader, and during the meeting they told stories when the group leader asked for responses to the homework questions. They also told narratives whenever the current topic of discussion sparked a relevant memory or the speaker sought the group's

advice about a perceived problem in her life. Similar to the stories that we read in the workbooks and heard WBS authors tell in the videos, stories that were told in the group could be either heartwarming or heartbreaking. Like the standard format for narratives in the WBS workbooks and videos, narratives told in the group meetings often included affirmations of faith, mentoring advice, and indirect complaints about the self or others (Boxer, 1993).

The following five excerpts are examples of meaning-making in conversational narratives (Ochs & Capps, 2001) that were co-constructed in an interpretive community. After providing a line-by-line analysis of each excerpt, I will analyze the group's patterned ways of speaking and tensions that arose in the talk.

**Part I: Spontaneous conversational narratives**

The secrets theme in Beth Moore's (2013) "Sacred Secrets" WBS series prompted women in the group to tell stories about their secrets. Revealing one's deep secrets to trusted friends is beneficial, according to Moore, because unrevealed secrets manifest in negative ways by adversely affecting one's relationships and/or health. Moore went public with her secrets in stories that she wrote in the workbook and told during the videos, including being molested throughout her childhood, and as an adult, fearing that her husband might fall in love with a younger woman and leave her. In addition to revealing her secrets, Moore provided blanks in the workbook for her women readers to reveal their secrets as they completed the homework. Spontaneously sharing stories and homework answers during the meeting was optional, but the atmosphere in the group was conducive to secret-sharing because whenever a woman told her secret, the group responded and interpreted the secret in emotionally supportive ways. It is also important to note that the group had a confidentiality pact; at the beginning of each new series, the group leader reminded us that "what happens in this room stays in this room." The meeting

was therefore a safe space for speaking openly in private without fear that what one said might become public.

In the first excerpt, Laura stunned the group by revealing that she had undergone artificial insemination in order to get pregnant with her only child. Laura was responding to the request in the "Sacred Secrets" WBS homework for women to share their secrets with their small groups, and this secret was shocking to the other women because Christians have a shared ideology that requires surrendering control over one's life to God, which is typical in social support groups (Welch Cline, 1999). This was a conversational narrative (Ochs & Capps, 2001) because the other women in the group co-constructed it. Laura was substituting for Darlene as group leader that day, and Laura asked for volunteers to respond to one of the homework questions that prompted the women to reveal their secrets. "Do you have a particular story or stories?" she asked. No one volunteered to tell a story that revealed a secret, so Laura then told us her secret. This excerpt includes five speakers: (a) Laura (L), a young stay-at-home mom who had recently joined the group; (b) Melanie (M), the nurse; (c) Denise (DE), a stay-at-home mom; (d) Jane (JA), a stay-at-home mom; and (e) Joy (J), the church's Bible studies coordinator:

**Excerpt 5a. The "miracle" story**

L: My daughter, we did conceive her through infertility treatments and when that started, I was like, "Oh" you know what I mean, we saw you on a microscope, you know, and um you know went through a lot involving the journey of whether we were going to do this, were we playing God … and I started to get a little unrest about maybe we had you know done something wrong. But then I have a, I have a little girl, and God is the author of our lives which you know … but anyway, we still didn't know if I was pregnant with her,

you know what I mean? The fact that she was growing in me was still not known, and I just you know … no matter how you can play God, infertility is still …

M: A secret.

L: You had to wait 10 days to have it work; you know it still has to, you know …

M: It's still a miracle.

L: It's still a miracle.

DE: Absolutely.

L: And still *His* miracle and He is the author of our life. Period. Whether you take technology or medicine or whatever and, and people have different views and I respect that but um, you know that's …

JA: Oh a huge step, way ahead better at a fertility …

J: Mm hmm.

L: And I put in so many eggs and He only gave me one because He was in control and I thank Him every day that I didn't have six.

GP: [laughter]

M: Yeah.

L: And He said you know you can't handle that, sister. I will give you one, not six. And *He* chose, He chose the one.

DE: He chose the *right* one.

Talking about secrets creates emotional intimacy between women (Tannen, 1990). When Laura said that she had undergone infertility treatments, she revealed that she had been unable to conceive children naturally. Even though the medical procedure was successful, Laura felt

uneasy about her decision ("I started to get a little unrest about maybe you know we had done something wrong" L4-6). She then transitioned into an affirmation of faith when she attributed her pregnancy to God: "But then I have a, I have a little girl, and God is the author of our lives" (L6). An author creates a story, so this implied that her story of getting pregnant was created by God, whom Christians believe is the divine creator of all life. She then supported this affirmation with the fact that artificial insemination is not always successful ("we still didn't know if I was pregnant" L7 and "no matter how you can play God, infertility is still …" L9). Even though Laura was talking about the probabilities of successful medical procedures, Melanie then finished her sentence with "A secret" (L10). This redirected the topic back to secrets, the theme of the "Sacred Secrets" WBS series and of this homework question.

At that point, Laura redirected the topic back to the probabilities for successful pregnancy and explained that the medical procedure takes time: "You had to wait 10 days to have it work; you know it still has to, you know …" (L11). Melanie then supported Laura's previous affirmation of faith that her pregnancy was caused by God: "It's still a miracle" (L12). These affirmations of faith attributed Laura's pregnancy to God's will, even though she had to have medical procedures to accomplish that goal. Denise also supported this reframing of science as God's miracle ("Absolutely" L14), and Laura again asserted that her pregnancy was "*His* miracle" (L15) and that God had decided how many of her eggs would be fertilized: "And I put in so many eggs and He only gave me one [child] because He was in control" (L20). Furthermore, Laura asserted that God chose which of her six eggs would be fertilized: "*He* chose, He chose the one" (L25). Denise again supported Laura's affirmation of faith by giving God credit for choosing the best egg to fertilize: "He chose the *right* one" (L26). This conversational narrative co-constructed the moral stance that artificial insemination is ethical

because God decides whether the medical procedure will be successful. Through co-tellership (Ochs & Capps, 2001), several members of the group collectively resolved Laura's unresolved life experience regarding motherhood.

Laura thus mitigated the shock of revealing her secret to a group of Christian women through: (a) remorseful reflection regarding her decision to undergo medical procedures to get pregnant; (b) affirmations of faith that God created her pregnancy; and (c) humor about the stress of being a mother: "and I thank Him every day that I didn't have six [children]" (L21). This conversational narrative therefore "membered" the participants in the group through affirmations of faith about their shared topics of motherhood and religion.

During the same meeting that Laura told her secret that she had undergone infertility treatments to become a mother to her only child, Melanie told a similar story. These narratives, however, were not consecutive; Melanie did not tell her secret until five minutes later *after* the group had agreed that medical procedures *are* acceptable because pregnancy is still God's decision. The group had resumed talking about the homework, and the workbook for that week included a metaphor about secret-telling. In the workbook, WBS author Beth Moore quoted a Bible verse: "Jesus said, 'No one after lighting a lamp puts it in a cellar or under a basket, but on a stand, so that those who enter may see the light'" (NIV Luke 11:33). She explained that the word "cellar" was translated from the Greek word "krypte" which means secret. The thought-provoking homework question regarding this Bible verse was: "How might you decide what things ought to be set on the lampstand and what things ought to be kept kryptos [secret]?" (Moore, 2013, p. 64). As we were thinking about that, Melanie told us that she had undergone fertility treatments and had kept them secret even from her co-workers in the hospital where she

worked as a nurse. The following excerpt includes six speakers: (a) Melanie (M); (b) Elizabeth (E); (c) Denise (DE); (d) Jane (JA); (e) Laura (L); and (f) Virginia (V):

**Excerpt 5b. The "village of rabbits" story**

M: The first thing that came to my mind was, um … when we were going through fertility, because I kept it a secret. My sister was a rabbit; she just loved her husband and she was pregnant. My sister-in-law was the same way. Everybody around me, I've nursed in the O.R., so we're 90% women. They are all rabbits. I lived in a village of rabbits, and I didn't under … you know, so for me to have to go through that and dart out on my break and go have scans done, and dart out on my breaks to you know, have blood work done or whatever, you know, all in secrecy, and so you know, and even with our friends, I mean having their … My husband travels and happens to get shots and just having to come forth and saying, "I can't do this alone. I need, I need … can you give me a shot?" … you know, it just was that whole thing, even though they are my closest friends, they are all rabbits. So it was very difficult for me to come forth and to admit that I couldn't *do* it. I couldn't, I wasn't a rabbit. And so I got a call after we had my son from the center that we used and they were like, the [name of newspaper] is doing an article on fertility and they said, "We just thought about you and thought you would be a good person for them to interview, but that still in your queue." And of course I said no. And then I was like, *God*. If you can *help* somebody with this, what are you afraid of? … It's like divorce or anything else that you go through, that you think you are the only one in the whole wide world that has to do this. It's not, and you realize how much you can help. So … I was able to

release my secret thing for Jesus to use to help others and to be that vehicle for Him to use …

E: Thanks for sharing.

DE: You still have that article?

M: I'm sure I do somewhere. Plus there was a picture in the paper, too, so it was a double conviction. I was like, oh man, now I'm really out there. And I'm not sure I want to be quite out there. And just, you know that's cool, that's … anyway.

JA: But think of how many people that you may have helped.

L: Yeah.

M: It … it just was amazing. Even for people at work that didn't know it, it was a totally, you know, a transformation for me …

JA: Yeah.

M: To be there without having to not talk about it anymore, not having to worry about it, um, as a deep secret.

DE: It is very isolating.

M: It is and it's a roller coaster, and it's one that most can't understand, so it's very, very difficult to find, um, to be able to trust people.

L: Yes, it is, and-and then you had the element of you know, your womanhood …

DE: Yeah.

E: Something, yeah, something you want so desperately, you know it's in your heart. You know it's, well, we can do this once …

A few minutes later, following more discussion about secrets, Virginia spontaneously took the storytelling floor:

67 V: I have something, just to share … God's plan. Um, I couldn't get pregnant. We
68 did invitro, and then I couldn't get pregnant, so we adopted. So it was God's
69 plan.
70 M: Absolutely.
71 L: Right.
72 V: You know, it's, it's, it's just there, and it's just … She's my daughter just as if I'd
73 given birth to her, so …
74 L: Absolutely, that's beautiful.
75 V: It's just the way God wants it to be.

After Laura told a narrative that shared her secret about motherhood, two of the other women told similar narratives. Melanie's story was about a motherhood problem; she could not get pregnant naturally, but her sister and all of her female co-workers were having multiple children. "They are all rabbits," she said in a frustrated tone of voice. "I lived in a village of rabbits" (L4,5). The word "rabbits" implies that these other women had no difficulty getting pregnant naturally, because rabbits are known to multiply in population at a high rate. Her narrative included an indirect complaint (Boxer, 1993) about her inability to conceive ("I couldn't *do* it. I couldn't, I wasn't a rabbit" L12,13).

Indirect complaints between women are "troubles talk" that creates emotional intimacy (Tannen, 1990, p. 50). Women generally talk about their problems to obtain understanding and confirmation of their feelings, and the social norm among women is to respond with mutual

understanding and/or a similar complaint (Tannen, 1990). While negative in tone, complaints between women can create a sense of community through solidarity, particularly when women share similar problems (Guendouzi, 2001; Tannen, 1990). Melanie's narrative about a similar motherhood problem indicated mutual understanding regarding Laura's narrative and can thus be seen as a bid for understanding and confirmation of her feelings from the women in the group.

After Melanie changed the tone of the discussion to troubles talk, she told the group that she initially refused to be interviewed by a local newspaper about the success of her medical procedures, but then she changed her mind: "If you can *help* somebody with this, what are you afraid of?" (L17,18). She then transitioned into mentoring advice: "you realize how much you can help [others]" (L20). Sharing her experiences publicly in the local newspaper would potentially give other women who could not conceive children hope that they could conceive with help from medical procedures. Melanie then framed her decision to go public with her secret as an affirmation of faith: "So … I was able to release my secret thing for Jesus to use to help others and to be that vehicle for Him to use" (L20-22). This reframed a negative experience into a positive gift to other women that was part of God's plan ("for Jesus to use" and "for Him to use" L21,22).

The women in the group responded with emotionally supportive comments ("Thanks for sharing" L23 and "think of how many people that you may have helped" L29), and the new member who had told the first narrative about infertility, Laura, noted that a woman's (in)ability to conceive children naturally reflects on her "womanhood" (L39). This referred to the fact that society sees women who can conceive naturally and prolifically as the ideal woman. Women who cannot conceive naturally therefore do not conform to this socially constructed gender stereotype; their social identity is stigmatized and they feel shame, so they keep it a secret.

Denise addressed this issue when she added: "there is nothing to be ashamed of" (L54). Elizabeth validated both women's reasons for having medical procedures done in order to become pregnant: "something you want so desperately, you know it's in your heart" (L41).

After Melanie told her story and reframed it as God's plan and Denise reframed infertility as not shameful for women, another woman in the group, Virginia, told her deep secrets about motherhood. She had secretly undergone artificial insemination but still could not get pregnant. "So we adopted," she said (L68). This happened as the group's discussion of Melanie's story was wrapping up, and it was another surprise during that meeting. Virginia began her story by announcing that she had "something, just to share" and said that it was "God's plan" that she could not get pregnant (L67). This was an affirmation of faith in troubles talk that reframed her failure to conceive even after having medical procedures in the same way that Laura and Melanie had reframed their infertility problems, as part of "God's plan" for their lives: "So it was God's plan" (L68,69). Again, the other women responded supportively with "Absolutely," "Right," and "Absolutely, that's beautiful" (L70,71,74). Virginia then closed the topic with another affirmation of faith: "It's just the way God wants it to be" (L75).

Secret-telling about motherhood in the group thus extended the theme in the "Sacred Secrets" series that it is beneficial to reveal deep secrets, and the norm for storytelling provided the women with opportunities to give oral performances that bonded the group emotionally. Furthermore, the participants collaboratively constructed and shared reactions to one another's stories, which served to reaffirm that the group was an interpretive community.

The next two narratives also pertain to motherhood and were told consecutively during a meeting while the group was completing Beth Moore's "Esther: It's Tough to be a Woman" WBS series. The theme of this series was complaints, and the women in the group complained

during every meeting about their lack of time due to their social roles as wives and mothers. Darlene told the following story while the group was talking about a survey that Beth Moore conducted online that asked women: "What are the three toughest things about being a woman?" (Fieldnote on 9/11/14). Darlene was even busier than before because she was commuting an hour each way to her new part-time job working 32 hours a week. This excerpt includes three speakers: (a) Darlene (D); (b) Karen (K); and (c) Anne (A).

**Excerpt 5c. The overburdened counselor story**

D: You know, I came home … It was Monday night. I got home at like 8:00 or something like that and Hannah was out with her friend and Mark was doing homework, so I did a little counseling session with Aubrey. "How are you doing?" You know, that's a half an hour counseling center … uh, session. Hannah gets home. She's getting ready to go to bed. She's kind of cranky at everybody. You know, half an hour counseling session there. It's 11:00 at night. I've just kind of worked a full day but that's okay. Made your lunches in the morning, all this stuff. Okay and then Mike is like, "Oh, it's crazy at work …" I got to listen to that.

GP: [laughter]

D: Let me take this all in and you see it pouring out my ears. You can get no more room in the inn, to take on all this and, and at work, at work, I've had this wonderful … it's, it's wonderful but people come and sit in my office and I know more people's life stories …

K: Uh-huh.

D: Like, they look at me. They sit in my office, "Well, you know. I'm divorced and

I got this going on" and I was just kind of like, "Did I ask? Was there something on my face that said I needed to know your life story?"

A: You just have that aura about you that …

K: And see, and men don't do that. They don't take on that much.

D: "I got the task. I got the task. Good. I got all I need from you. I'm done."

K: Yeah. When you stand in the grocery store line, don't you end up talking to people or someone … when you walk away, my husband will always say, "Why did she tell you that?" Right, right.

GP: [laughter]

D: That's my aura. That's because I'm a Bible study girl.

K: Cause men don't … They don't do that. They just …

D: Although the guy at the Circle K yesterday was telling me how difficult it was, telling me how difficult it was to put away the candy order, when the candy order came in. I'm like, "*Dude*. I just want to buy a cup of coffee and use the restroom." I mean, "Okay. Thank you. I'm sorry. Have a nice day. Good luck with that. I'll *pray* for you?"

GP: [laughter]

A: Maybe God is trying to tell you, you need to be a counselor. Maybe, maybe somehow …

K: And it's not that you don't care. You just can't spend anymore …

D: I, I, I can't. There's a point like, and I feel bad for Mike, there's that point where it's just like full. You're talking. I hear you. I see your mouth and I'm nodding and all that but I'll, I'll check myself and I'll be like, "I have no idea what you

40 just said two seconds ago" and then he'll be … He'll catch on that I'm …

Darlene's story exemplified troubles talk about being a mother and a woman. It included indirect complaints (Boxer, 1993) about her children, her husband and a stranger at a convenience store. Darlene presents herself as a "supermom" who worked in and outside of the home, arriving home from work around 8:00 p.m. on a Monday night. Instead of relaxing, however, she went into her role as the nurturer of the family: "I did a little counseling session with Aubrey" (L3). In describing this conversation with her teenage daughter as a "counseling session," Darlene framed herself as a professional therapist who listens to other people's problems. After half-hour counseling sessions with both her teenage daughters, she then listened to her husband's problems: "then Mike is like, 'Oh, it's crazy at work … ' I got to listen to that" (L8,9). In this narrative, she projects a desired identity as a good mother and a good wife because she listened to three other people's problems until 11:00 at night after she "worked a full day" at the office and even made their lunches that morning (L7).

The theme of this troubles talk was a lack of time because Darlene was overwhelmed with her responsibilities. She mitigated the tension of these complaints with a humorous metaphor about information overload in her brain: "you see it pouring out my ears. You can get no more room in the inn" (11,12). Next, Darlene complained that she had the same problem at work, but she mitigated her complaint about her new co-workers with the word "wonderful": "it's wonderful but people come and sit in my office and I know more people's life stories" (13,14). They also told her their personal problems: "they look at me. They sit in my office. 'Well, you know, I'm divorced and I got this going on'" (L16,17). In this part of the narrative,

Darlene was affirming her identity as the good co-worker at her new job while simultaneously complaining about her role there as a therapist.

When therapists listen to other people's problems, they are working in a job that requires emotional labor, so Darlene's troubles talk about being a counselor to her family at home *and* to her peers at work was an indirect complaint about her lack of time and being overwhelmed by emotional labor. Fulfilling social expectations for the working mother did not give her any leisure time for herself in which to relax and unwind after a long day of work (making lunches before leaving, working at her office, and counseling three people after she got home that night). She expressed her frustration in a humorous tone by voicing her thoughts as she listened to her co-workers problems: "I was just kind of like, 'Did I ask? Was there something on my face that said I needed to know your life story?'" (L17,18).

One of the young stay-at-home moms, Anne, then transitioned into talk about religion by reframing Darlene's problem in spiritual terms: "You just have that aura about you that …" (L19). In this group of Christian women, telling Darlene that she had an aura was a compliment that she had a spiritual gift. Karen, however, transitioned back to troubles talk by complaining about the differences in social expectations for women and men: "And see, and men don't do that. They don't take on that much" (L20). She said that people tell her their problems while she is standing in the grocery store checkout line. Darlene then responded to Anne's religious reference: "That's my aura. That's because I'm the Bible study girl" (L26). Troubles talk was intertwined with talk about religion, and Darlene and Anne were doing their identity as the good Christian.

After Karen complained about men again ("Cause men don't … They don't do that. They just …" L27), Darlene complained that a clerk in a convenience store had told her his

problems: “the guy at the Circle K yesterday was telling me how difficult it was … to put away the candy order” (L28,29). Retail stores are public places where polite small talk is the social norm for interaction between employees and customers, so this was troubles talk about being a counselor to someone she didn’t even know. Again, she mitigated the complaint with humor by describing her thoughts during that encounter: “I’m like, ‘*Dude*. I just want to buy a cup of coffee and use the restroom’” (L30,31). She intertwined troubles talk with religion by joking that the only thing she could do to help this stranger was pray: “I’ll *pray* for you?” (L31,32). Anne then focused on religion when she suggested that Darlene’s aura as a counselor might be a higher calling for her life: “Maybe God is trying to tell you, you need to be a counselor” (L34). As in the previous storytelling excerpts, a conversation that began as troubles talk and related to motherhood evolves into collaborative affirmations of faith and religious identity.

As often happened in the group, Darlene’s spontaneous narrative was immediately followed by another woman’s spontaneous narrative about the same topic. After Darlene said that her mind gets so full that she cannot absorb any more information (L38), Anne told a related story. The speakers in this narrative were: (a) Anne (A); (b) Melanie (M); (c) Darlene (D); (d) Carol (C); (e) Karen (K); and (f) Nancie (N), the researcher:

**Excerpt 5d. The “Mommy Brain” story**

A: My husband asked … told me, “I think you might need to see your doctor, maybe a neurologist?” He says, “You know, your memory, you just don’t remember any …” And I really, I have a bad case of CRS. Like, he tells me something. I say, “Okay.” [whooshing noise] Out the other side. So, you know, I … “It’s just Mommy Brain, it’s just Mommy Brain.” So I went to my doctor and she laughed. She goes, “It’s Mommy Brain. You have every …”

GP: [laughter]

A: "Everybody else's stuff." I have PTA. I have him. I have my son. I have my best friend. What's she doing today? Oh, she's got this today. You know, I have all that. My sister. My dad. You know, everything going on and then he says, "Well, can you call about the pool?" and I'm like, "Okay," and then I put the phone down. Pool's gone and I'm like, "Oh, I forgot. I have to do this." And so, it doesn't get done. So um, I came home, I told him, "It's just what … you know, it's Mommy Brain. You got …" He has one person.

GP: Yes [in unison]

A: He has one person he has to … He knows his schedule. He'll say, "Well I didn't know you were doing that today." "I told you three times." So, you know.

M: Maybe he should see a neurologist about that.

GP: [laughter]

D: He needs to … Getting ready for church. Getting ready for church or getting ready to go anywhere. I would spend about the same amount of time messing around on a Sunday morning with the paper or whatever and then go get myself ready or get … I would make sure the girls were ready. He'd go and take a shower. Get himself ready. He's ready. The girls are ready and they're all mad at me because they're waiting for me. I'm like, "Dude. I just got three people ready for church. You just got you ready for church."

A: Yes. Get up an hour before he does and he just gets up, throws on clothes, walks out the door. It's like, "You're not ready yet? I told you 10:00." I'm like, "I had to do everything else."

D: You do, right? We seriously do need moments.

A: Yeah. It must be nice just to be able to focus on one person. You know, just to have that, 'I'm just going to wake up, get myself ready and get in the car. We're going to (amusement park). I told you 10:00." You know and I'm like, I got to pack the bag and I got to make sure we have our passes and there have got to be snacks and drinks and, "Oh, did I bring the sunscreen," and he gets there, you know, it's like, "Oh, I should have brought sunscreen." I pull it out of my bag. "I need a Band Aid." I pull it out of my bag and he's like …

C: This is why we relate.

A: And this is why I can't remember that I didn't call the pool guy but I remembered all this. I wrote lists for them. "We're going to (amusement park) tomorrow. You need to pack this and this" and that worked better for me because I …

N: Delegate.

D: Yeah, I delegate. Delegating is key. Delegating is key.

M: You just don't pick up on that stuff. You do have to … I've learned that too. You, you have to be specific.

A: They're not thinking about it. They're not thinking about it, so you have to give them a list.

M: Yeah. Here's what I need.

D: Yeah and usually if you ask them, they're pretty good about it.

C: Good idea. I need to start making a list, not just for myself.

K: Especially for like your kids and stuff. You know, the night before, lay out your clothes. Decide your clothes. So you just get up and get dressed and

93 not have to …

94 D: But I would *hope* most of our husbands are not, you know, rotten, rotten guys,

95 that they really want to help us but it's in our heads and it's not in their heads.

In sync with Darlene's original topic that her mind was overwhelmed, Anne recalled that her husband had "asked … told" (L41) her that she had a serious memory problem. "Asked" implies politeness and "told" implies an order, so reframing her husband's question as a directive showed that she interpreted his criticism as something she had to do: "I think you might need to see your doctor, maybe a neurologist?" (L42). Anne also admitted that she did have a memory problem, but she called it "a bad case of CRS" (L43) and attributed the cause of it to "Mommy Brain" (L45).

I had never heard the "CRS" acronym or the "Mommy Brain" phrase before, so I researched them online after the meeting. The phrase "Mommy Brain" is popular slang in the discourse of motherhood that explains everyday moments of memory loss among mothers (Hurley, 2013). Parenting experts and mothers have used Mommy Brain to denote chronic forgetfulness in mothers that makes them do embarrassingly mindless things such as forgetting to put shoes on before going to work (Hurley, 2013; Lucia, n.d.; Smokler, 2012). Another catch phrase for forgetfulness is CRS (Can't Remember Stuff) syndrome, which is memory loss in adults aged 40 and older that is caused when information overload occasionally overwhelms brain neurons (McAllister, 2010). Even though Anne was a young mother who looked like she was in her late twenties or early thirties, she used both "CRS" and "Mommy Brain" to explain her memory problems.

Anne used the term "Mommy Brain" to defend her brain health to her husband, but her story also indicates that she *did* follow her husband's advice/order to see her doctor ("So I went to my doctor" L45). Her doctor diagnosed her memory problem using the same term: "It's Mommy Brain" (L46). This story took the form of troubles talk about lack of time and being a mother, but Anne reframed her memory problem as normative. When she announced that her doctor had confirmed her initial diagnosis of the problem, the group laughed, so she continued her story by explaining that her memory problem was caused by trying to manage too many projects ("everything" L50) and people ("Everybody else's stuff" L48). In sharing how much she was trying to accomplish, she was presenting her identity as the "good" (stay-at-home) mother (Hays, 1996) who strives to manage her household ("the pool" L51) while also coordinating activities and being a nurturer to her family (her husband, son, sister and dad), being a good friend ("best friend" L49), and being active in her community ("PTA" in L48 indicates that she is a volunteer at the parent teacher association at her child's school).

After describing her responsibilities and reaffirming that her memory problem was normative for busy mothers, Anne then complained about her husband: "He has one person" (L54). This was an indirect complaint that resonated in a room filled with busy mothers and grandmothers who also manage households and families. Several of the other women responded "Yes" in unison, and this solidarity encouraged Anne to continue her story, even though she had previously been shy as a young newcomer to the group. In this part of her story, she complained that even though her husband only manages his own schedule, he also has memory problems because he doesn't remember things she tells him about her schedule. Melanie then mitigated the complaint with emotionally supportive humor: "Maybe he should see a neurologist about that" (L58).

The group laughed at Melanie's joke, but then Darlene continued the troubles talk about husbands, motherhood and lack of time by complaining that she too had to coordinate multiple schedules whenever she and her family were "getting ready for church or getting ready to go anywhere" (L60,61). Darlene's complaint focused on the fact that her husband only gets himself ready but she has to get herself and her children ready: "I just got three people ready for church. You just got you ready for church" (L65,66). Building on Darlene's complaint, Anne then complained about having to pack everything whenever her family went to an amusement park ("passes … snacks and drinks [for the car trip] … sunscreen … Band Aid" L74-77). These similar complaints show the camaraderie in the group of women whenever they engaged in troubles talk; indirect complaints unified them because of shared identity (Boxer, 1993).

At this point, the troubles talk transitioned into mentoring advice because Anne shared that she wrote and gave her family lists of items that they needed to bring on their day trips. The other women enthusiastically supported the idea of delegating tasks to family members ("Delegating is key" L83). One of the young stay-at-home moms, Carol, then accepted this suggestion: "Good idea. I need to start making a list, not just for myself" (L90). The group leader, Darlene, finally ended this conversational narrative with emotionally supportive talk regarding husbands: "But I would *hope* that most of our husbands are not, you know, rotten, rotten guys" (L94). By closing the topic of the overburdened woman with "*hope*" that their husbands "really want to help but … it's not in their heads" (L94,95), she draws on gender stereotypes of women as the nurturers of the family for biological reasons.

**Part II: The story chain**

Another communicative practice that unified the group was telling narratives in response to the icebreaker question at the beginning of the meeting. These "story chains" were linked by a

common theme which most often was motherhood, and throughout the process, the group often responded after each woman told a short or long story. The next narrative that I will analyze was part of a story chain when the women took turns answering Darlene's icebreaker question at the beginning of the meeting, which was: "What's the gift that you've been most excited to give?" After Darlene began the icebreaker exercise by telling a narrative about a gift that she had given to her daughter, Joy told a similar story. The following excerpt includes seven speakers: (a) Joy (J); (b) Melanie (M); (c) Jane (JA); (d) Laura (L); (e) Karen (K); (f) Denise (DE); and Nancie (N), the researcher:

**Excerpt 5e. The "birthday stocking" story**

J: Recently my youngest daughter had a birthday, and since I stopped working, I had some time. And, and I asked her, "What do you want for your birthday? What's on your wish list?" And she said, "I want a birthday stocking." And I said, "No, no, you don't get it. Stockings are for Christmas." [laughter] And she said, "I know. I want a birthday stocking." And, um, I just thought what the heck. Typical her, you know, something out there. And, um … so I went to JoAnne's Fabrics [store] and she loves Hello Kitty. And I got this beautiful, and her birthday was around Valentine's Day, so beautiful Hello Kitty holding hearts, and pink feather boa trim and, you know. And then I filled it with all these, like, over the top, wonderful things that she was, like, thrilled about. And I hung it where we hang our Christmas stockings after Santa fills them, you know, right on our doorknob. And so, um, her … I was just so excited about having the capacity, not working like a maniac, I could actually do something for my child, since I've been an absentee parent for a little while. So, uh, she comes down,

birthday morning and we have a little tradition of doing the breakfast, and, and I said, "Did-did you get your stocking?" And she said, "Oh yeah." And later that day, she said, "Mom, where did you buy a, um, Hello Kitty birthday stocking?" And I said, "Buy? I uh, I made it." And she said, "No!" [laughter] And I was like SCORE! [laughter as she pumped her fist high above her head] One for Mama. And I have pictures [laughter]

M: That's cool.

J: I have a video presentation [laughter]

JA: Yeah.

J: And then I thought, you know, I'm going to start an Etsy [home-based business advertised on Etsy.com], you know, one of those little, uh, Etsies or whatever.

L: Yeah. Yeah.

J: I'm going to be the online, customized, order your birthday or any occasion stocking …

N: There you go.

K: Before you know [laughter]

D: Your new little private industry.

J: You never know.

DE: I'll buy one.

GP: [laughter]

L: I need an Easter stocking soon.

JA: I have birthdays coming up in 10 days.

J: I've got it.

Joy began her story by contextualizing her life: "since I stopped working, I had some time" (L42,43). This was in sync with the group's previous discussions about lack of time, and we knew that Joy had recently quit her job at the church. Her daughter had requested a gift that she could not buy, so in order to be a good mother and give her daughter what she wanted for her birthday, Joy had to create the gift. Sewing is very time-consuming, so this implied that the project was not quick and easy. This story indicated that Joy spent a great deal of time sewing the giant sock-shaped stocking *and* shopping for ideal gifts to fill it.

Following this recollection of events, Joy intertwined her motherhood experience with troubles talk about her previous lack of time as a working mother. She said that she was "just so excited" to have the time for this project because she was "not working like a maniac" (L53,54). This reflection raised the problem of the lack of time that the other working moms in the group were still experiencing: "I could actually do something for my child, since I've been an absentee parent for a little while" (L54,55). "Absentee parent" was a complaint about Joy's previous schedule, and it implied that while working outside of the home, she was not able to fulfill social expectations for the working mother.

After lamenting her previous lack of time, Joy returned to the chronological sequence of her story and used reported speech to tell the group how she was able to please and surprise her daughter with this unusual home-sewn birthday gift ("Buy? I uh, I made it" L39). As Darlene often did, Joy then described her thoughts during this event: "And I was like SCORE! One for Mama" (L60,61). Scoring is an activity which is associated with athletes in competitive sports, and as Joy said "score" loudly, she dramatically pumped her fist in the air, as athletes often do when they celebrate points scored in a game. When one scores, she accomplishes a goal to

perform better than others and get ahead of others in a competition. These women were performing the good mother identity for other women in a church setting where family values are a priority. Joy "scored" as a mother when she gave her daughter the birthday stocking because she made herself look like a "good" mother in her family. Joy also "scored" by telling this narrative in this group, because her story enhanced her image as a mother and made her look like a better mother than the rest of mothers in the room who do not sew special birthday gifts for their children due to a lack of time, energy or sewing ability.

Joy also shared her excitement that she was planning to start a home-based business ("I'm going to be the online, customized, order your birthday or any occasion stocking" L68,69). The other women in the group responded with emotionally supportive feedback which indicated that Joy's idea could be a "new little private industry" (L72). Three of the women (Denise, Laura and Jane) volunteered to be Joy's first three customers by placing orders for customized gift stockings for "Easter" L76 and "birthdays" L77), and Joy wrapped up her story by confirming that she was serious about filling their orders ("I've got it" L78).

**Patterned ways of speaking in the group**

These five narratives show that interpretive, relational talk was a norm for interaction in this group. Laura revealed her secret even though she was a newcomer who had recently joined the group, which is an indication that the support group atmosphere in the women's Bible study was a safe space where everyone could be trusted. Laura's story about infertility prompted Melanie to tell her story about the same problem, a deep secret about motherhood of which she was ashamed ("I couldn't *do* it" L13). Melanie did not tell her story during Laura's story or immediately after it; she waited until we discussed the homework question that pertained to the decision of whether to tell a secret or keep it confidential, which directly pertained to her

decision to go public with her secret. While Laura was telling her story, Melanie gave her encouraging responses ("It's still a miracle" L12 and "Yeah" L23), but she did not interrupt Laura's story, even though she had a similar story to tell. This shows the relational nature of talk in this group; whenever one of the members told a story, the other women gave her the "floor" and did not interrupt her except to give affirmations and other encouraging responses. Moreover, no one criticized another group member, even after they revealed shocking secrets.

The three secrets about infertility also show that one story often led to another story about the same topic. These stories included problems about motherhood, but they were reframed through the course of conversation as affirmations of faith ("It's just the way God wants it to be" L75). From this point of view, what happened to each woman was recast as a blessing because they were able to become mothers, and God was control, which confirmed their religious beliefs. Again, the group's supportive responses unified the group and boosted each storyteller's self-image and social status as a mother ("She's my daughter just as if I'd given birth to her" E5b, L72,73). In a group where motherhood was one of the most common topics, the word "womanhood" (E5b,L39) created opportunities to avow shared identities and their affirmations of faith signified their membership in the community.

These revealed secrets were conversational narratives in which co-tellers actively voiced their thoughts, feelings and beliefs to collectively construct a moral stance that resolved unresolved life experiences within a prevailing moral framework (Ochs & Capps, 2001). "The dialogic character of everyday narrative activity allows personal experience to be shaped by … interlocutors exerting authority in this process" (Ochs & Capps, 2001, p. 55). These stories and group discussions exemplify meaning-making in social interaction because as Laura and Melanie told their secrets to the group (chronological descriptions of life experience), the women's

collective responses reframed artificial insemination and fertility treatments as acceptable for Christian women (moral evaluation), even though these medical procedures conflict with their shared religious ideology (Ochs & Capps, 2001; Welch Cline, 1999). This co-constructed moral stance resulted from the interplay of text and talk, because the text in the workbook (tell your secrets) and talk in the meeting (secret-telling) constructed a space for reconfiguring meaning in this group (ledema, 2007).

Through relationally responsive talk (Cunliffe, 2008), the participants co-constructed a different interpretation that reframed the outcome of scientific medical procedures (pregnancy or not being pregnant) as the work and will of God ("miracle" E5a, L12,13,15 and "*He* chose" E5a,L25,26). In doing so, they created and explained a new religious belief for themselves and other Christian women (Cunliffe, 2008; Wuthnow, 1994a). This built solidarity, a union of interests, purposes, or sympathies among members of the group (Boxer, 1993). It is an example of how co-authored conversational narratives that include description, chronology, evaluation and explanation "build communities" (Ochs & Capps, 2001, p. 57).

Troubles talk and mentoring advice about motherhood in narratives 5c and 5d created camaraderie by unifying the participants through shared frustrations with their social roles as wives and mothers. This lengthy conversational narrative is another example of the group's storytelling norm because the two narratives pertained to the same topics, motherhood and lack of time, and the other women supported complaints with similar indirect complaints about their husbands in the group discussion that followed each narrative. Darlene was a working mom and Anne was a stay-at-home mom, and the fact that no one in the group mentioned the obvious inequality between the two storytellers' responsibilities also shows the relational nature of talk in the group; none of the working moms said that they have more difficulty meeting social

expectations for the nurturer in the family and in society because they work outside of the home. These two narratives also show that the group functioned as a support group.

Joy's narrative about creating a birthday stocking for her daughter was an exemplar of stories that were told in story chains during the icebreaker ritual, which occurred during the beginning of the first few meetings whenever we started a new WBS series. In telling narratives about motherhood during the icebreaker ritual, the women constructed their motherhood identity through oral performances that framed themselves as the caring mother (Guendouzi, 2005) in accordance with their social role. Conforming to social norms for motherhood enhanced their identity and moral worth (Guendouzi, 2001) as a mother and as a Christian. Family values are considered a high priority in Christian communities, so they were "doing" their identity as the "good" mother and Christian. Motherhood and lack of time once again arose in troubles talk and mentoring advice in oral performances that provided emotional support.

**Tensions and practical theology Part I: Science and religion**

Revealing secrets about medical procedures that enable women to become pregnant (in narratives 5a and 5b) seems to challenge implicit social norms for talk in this religious group because of the tension between science and religion; the implicit "elephant in the room" was the shared knowledge that these medical procedures are controversial in Christian communities. Undergoing scientific treatments to get pregnant would be "playing God" instead of letting God decide whether pregnancy will occur. Laura acknowledged this when she said, "people have different views" E5a,L16). Science and religion have historically been political opponents in arguments regarding the theory of evolution, and Evangelical and Mainline Protestants have differing views (Barnhart, 1993; Dixon et al., 1992; Jones, 2016). Evangelicals are divided into literalist and non-literalist camps; literalists believe that the creation story in the Book of Genesis

is factual, but non-literalists believe that it is literature (Dixon et al., 1992). Mainline Protestants adapted their doctrine to include both divine creation and evolution; their theory of "theistic evolution" includes Darwinism (Jones, 2016). In a divided national Christian community, medical issues such as assisted suicide, abortion and infertility treatments that end or generate life have been controversial because some Christians believe that only God should decide when to begin or end life (Jones, 2016). This is another reason why Christian women keep their infertility treatments a secret; social rejection is a realistic possibility in a Christian community that has different views regarding issues that pertain to both science and religion.

Conversational narratives, however, give interlocutors the means to "grapple with unresolved life experiences" (Ochs & Capps, 2001, p. 57). In a group of women who routinely shared stories that created emotional intimacy, the fact that these medical procedures were kept secret until this meeting demonstrates that these life experiences were unresolved ethically ("I started to get a little unrest about maybe we had you know done something wrong" E5a, L4-6 and "were we playing God" E5a, L4). The telling of these stories thus shows "the desire to sheathe life experience with a soothing linearity and moral certainty" (Ochs & Capps, 2001, p. 56). The other women in the group responded by reframing the unresolved life experience with emotionally supportive moral certainty. After Laura admitted that she had undergone artificial insemination, Melanie said that infertility must be kept "a secret" (E5a,L10). Melanie was the first member of the group to respond, and she inserted this phrase into Laura's narrative to finish Laura's sentence after she paused ("no matter how you can play God, infertility is still" E5a,L9). This phrase ("a secret") was an evaluation (Ochs & Capps, 2001) that mitigated shame and the fact that Laura had not told anyone about this event sooner. This evoked the failure-to-be-the-ideal-woman tension that occurs when women are unable to conceive children, because women

are expected to bear children to fulfill their social role (for "womanhood" E5b,L39). Melanie had felt this social pressure because she was working in a hospital where all of her female co-workers were having babies. Still in sync with their ideology that God ("He") is still in control ("It's still a miracle" E5a,L12,13 and "He chose the one" E5a,L25 and "He chose the *right* one" E5a,L26), the women discursively created an explanation that (re)interpreted these life experiences.

These three narratives are examples of *practical theology* in an interpretive community because interpretations of medical problems as part of "God's plan" constructed new meaning that science and religion *can* work together in the lives of Christians. Storytelling in an emotionally supportive group allowed the women to make sense of difficult choices they had made in terms of their shared religion. Sharing their secrets and reframing fertility treatments as acceptable for Christian women altered their theology, one's individual understanding of one's religious life, in a way that was practical because they no longer had to keep their fertility problems secret and endure private shame that they could not conceive children naturally. Secret-sharing that was prompted by the theme of the WBS series thus created opportunities for new interpretation of religious beliefs through reframing in "socially forged" active co-construction (Ochs & Capps, 2001, p. 55). These women co-constructed a practical theology that specifically pertained to their embodied life experiences as mothers and recognized the importance of motherhood experiences, the latter which are absent in the Bible because it is a patriarchal text.

**Tensions Part II: Social expectations for parenting**

Narratives 5c and 5d show the relational tension between married men and women regarding the inequality of social expectations for parenting. Mothers are still expected to be

primary caregivers who are "available" to their families even though women entered the workforce decades ago (Hayes, 1996; Hochschild, 1989). Mothers who work outside of the home spend significantly more time taking care of children and doing housework than fathers (Bianchi et al., 2006). Fathers do not feel social pressure to take care of their children, even though their wives work full-time at paying jobs (Bianchi, Robinson & Milkie, 2006; Sasaki, Hazen & Swann, 2010). Mothers are therefore oppressed by lingering inequality in social expectations for mothers and fathers that are based on patriarchal norms, values and practices (Bianchi et al., 2006; Ranson, 1999; Sasaki et al., 2010). These social expectations are salient for Christian wives and mothers because the patriarchal ideology of gender stereotypes is promoted in the Evangelical Christian media (Jones, 2016).

In everyday life, mothers are expected to take care of their families before they take care of themselves (Arendell, 2000; Hays, 1996; Held, 1993; Tong, 1997; Weingarten, 1997). Darlene was a "supermom" who worked outside of the home, but formerly she controlled her work schedule because she was a substitute teacher in a K-12 public school system. Each day when she was called for a temporary work assignment, she had the option of saying no. Her new job required her to work four consecutive days a week, so she had lost that autonomy and still was expected to fulfill her social role as the nurturer in the family and in society. The gender-related tension in Darlene's narrative therefore resulted from her lack of time for herself. Anne's narrative also reflected the lack of time for self issue because as a young stay-at-home mom, she was under social pressure to be the selfless "good" mother 24 hours a day (Hays, 1996). This is why she had to do "everything" and manage schedules and relationships (L50). Her frustration with that social pressure was evident when she expressed jealousy regarding her husband's social

role: “It must be nice just to be able to focus on one person” (L71). In her role as wife and mother, she had no private time for herself.

**Tensions Part III: Motherhood identity as a competition**

Narrative 5e shows the tension that mothers experience regarding social expectations for mothers to buy each child what he or she really wants for birthdays and special occasions. Joy’s story reflected the pressure faced by a woman who was striving to be a “good” mother in the eyes of her family and society at large. Trying to conform to social expectations for the “good” mother or supermom is thus a never-ending quest, and Joy’s “SCORE!”(E5g,L60) was a moral evaluation of her motherhood identity that framed the good mother as an ongoing competition. These and other narratives that were told during this story chain were oral performances of motherhood identity, and whenever a mother is recognized for her efforts to conform to the good mother ideology, she scores a point in the never-ending competition to present herself in accordance with social norms.

Because Joy reveled in the fact that she had plenty of time to nurture her children by sewing special gifts now that she no longer worked outside of the home, her narrative showed the tension in interaction between supermoms and stay-at-home mothers as they strive to fulfill social expectations. Describing herself as an “absentee parent” (E5g, L55) while she was working at the church implied that mothers who work outside of the home are not fulfilling social expectations for motherhood. This supports research studies that have indicated that mothers who work outside of the home feel guilty for not spending time with their children due to work-home tension, conflicting priorities between responsibilities in their workplace and in their home (Brown, Small & Lumley, 1997; Hays, 1996; Johnston & Swanson, 2006; Pedersen, 2012).

In sum, the WBS participants were a speech community, a social group that shared "knowledge of rules for the conduct and interpretation of speech" (Hymes, 1972b, p. 49). Their speech situation was the Thursday morning meeting in the church classroom where storytelling and group discussions occurred in accordance with social norms for talk that had been co-constructed over time and were learned through socialization. In this communicative scene, women interpreted their sacred text and made sense of their everyday lives through practical theology that co-constructed new meaning. Demonstrating communicative competence through storytelling that included indirect complaints, affirmations of faith and mentoring advice united the group in making sense of religion, motherhood, and busy lives and gave them a sense of belonging in an emotionally close-knit community that functioned as a support group. In the next chapter, I will further analyze communicative competence, social norms and practical theology in this interpretive community by analyzing the interplay of text, talk and video (the instrumentalities) in the group's multimodal learning process.

# CHAPTER FOUR:

# CONTEMPORARY MULTIMODAL WOMEN'S BIBLE STUDY: TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE WORD, INTERPRETIVE AUTHORITY AND PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

Today's electronically-mediated Bible studies for women provide additional opportunities for engagement and interpretation. In a traditional format, the group leader assigned a few pages of Scripture that the members were expected to read prior to the next meeting, so participation began with each individual reading silently at home. During the meeting, the group leader asked each member to read aloud verses in the assigned reading. Each time someone read a few verses aloud, the group discussed the meaning of those verses. This discussion was initiated by the group leader, and a few other members of the group usually contributed their interpretations. In co-ed Bible study groups, similar to the one in which I was a member, men are often the group leaders and the social norm is for men to interpret the Bible while the women listen. A traditional format therefore includes individual (silent) reading of Scripture to prepare for the meeting, oral performances as the members speak verses aloud in a structured sequence, and oral interpretations which primarily are spoken by men in the group.

## The Word and Multimodality in Contemporary WBS

The contemporary electronically enhanced mediated WBS format that Beth Moore created augmented this traditional format with the addition of entertaining videos and an artfully-designed, easy-to-read workbook that engaged the participants in additional communicative practices and modalities. The WBS learning process is a challenging weekly routine that

includes: (a) individual learning in five days of reading and homework assignments prior to every meeting; (b) group discussion and application of new material during the first hour of the meeting; (c) group learning while watching a video during the second half of the meeting; and (d) group discussion after watching the video.

The weekly homework required the members to read the workbook and the Bible (silently) before the meetings, interpret the meaning of Bible verses individually, and write their interpretations in the workbook. During the first hour of the meetings, the women recited Bible verses aloud voluntarily in an unstructured manner as the group discussed the homework, and the members of the group listened to one another and compared their interpretations. In this interdenominational group, older women and longtime members of the group dominated the discussion and co-construction of meaning, which indicated a power-status hierarchy. During the second hour of the meetings as the group watched the video, the Christian woman author recited numerous Bible verses aloud and periodically signaled her present and future audiences (her studio audience where the video was filmed, and groups of women who would watch the DVDs) to repeat key verses or phrases. As the women in the studio audience repeated verses and phrases in unison, the women in the classroom also obeyed the speaker's "repeat after me" command. Therefore, in these electronically mediated Bible studies; the members read and interpreted Scripture silently at home and had opportunities to read Scripture and their interpretations of it aloud during the freeform discussion of the WBS homework. After the discussion of the homework, they watched the speaker in the video, heard her recite numerous Bible verses, and recited Bible verses in unison on command.

These new communicative practices are salient because each type of activity engages different human senses, and the senses of sound and sight evoke different meanings that have

changed over time as society has evolved from oral culture to print culture to the electronic age (Ong, 2000). In the next section, I will explain how new forms of media and different sensorial aspects of oral, print and electronic culture have influenced how Christians experience the Word.

**Sound, Sight and Thought: The Word as Power and Performative Event**

Ong (2000) chronicled the historical transition of the Word through three stages of culture: (a) oral; (b) script; and (c) electronic. In oral culture, "the word is something that happens" when people speak and hear others speak (Ong, 2000, p. 22). Written words are "less real (although more permanent) than when they are spoken … [and] the spoken word … is nevertheless in the deepest sense more real … than the word sensed through writing" (Ong, 2000, p. 114-115). Because speakers actively produce words to communicate with others, spoken words have "an aura of power" (Ong, 2000, p. 112). Speaking and hearing words in oral performances creates a sense of presence in that we experience another person, and when we experience another person in a group, socialization occurs. "Sound unites groups of living beings as nothing else does" (Ong, 2000, p. 122). Speaking is powerful in a Bible study group because when individuals speak the Word, they and their listeners feel a sense of the presence of God (Ong, 2000). Oral performances of the Word in a Bible study group are thus for many more intense, powerful and unifying than reading the Word silently in solitude as the isolated thinker.

**Transformations of the Word in the Electronic Age**

The invention of the radio transformed the Word from print into mediated sound that was broadcast into every American living room. "Sound itself is related to present actuality rather than to past or future … [and] involvement with sound is involvement with the present, with here-and-now existence and activity" (Ong, 2000, p. 111-112). Hearing the Word spoken on one's radio therefore was more engaging than reading the Bible because "sound conveys

meaning more powerfully and accurately than sight" (Ong, 2000, p. 115). The meaning of written words can be more easily misinterpreted because they lack non-verbal communication such as inflection. "The spoken word does have more power than the written to do what the word is meant to do, to communicate" (Ong, 2000, p. 115).

Whereas radio transformed the Word into an oral performance that conveyed more meaning, the invention of television added the visual element of seeing the speaker's oral performance. "Visually perceived space … [is] inhabited by presence" ((Ong, 2000, p. 167). A voice on the radio conveys more meaning than the written word, but an image of a person talking on a television screen manifests the presence of the speaker. In our visualist culture, "we feel truly at home only in a world of sight" (Ong, 2000, p. 169). Watching someone speak the Word on television was therefore more engaging visually and conveyed meaning through non-verbal communication that included inflection, facial expressions and gestures.

The computer age further changed how Christians experience the Word, because today one can simply Google a Bible verse and read it on a smart phone, iPad or laptop computer. Instead of seeing the Word in print in the context of a sacred book, a lone sentence appears out of context on a computer screen. This includes the sense of touch, but the reader is not touching the Bible, a sacred book that invokes reverence. Nonetheless, touch creates a sense of reality, so reading the Word online (or in the Bible) is more real than simply hearing the Word on a radio program (Ong, 2000). In addition, videos such as those in WBS series combine writing, print, sound and touch. "The meaning of reality is … specifically … involved with the sense of touch … [and] our sense of reality is … tactilely based more directly than it is visually based" (Ong, 2000, p. 172). Women who watch these videos see Beth Moore, hear her words, write notes in the workbook, and recite key verses and phrases in unison after seeing the words appear briefly

on the screen. Seeing the author of the workbook give an oral performance creates a sense of reality due to the visualist culture in the electronic age. In accordance with the myth of objective reality, "seeing is believing" (Ong, 2000, p. 169). This sense of reality through sight is heightened by sound, as the power of spoken words in oral performance creates shared acoustic space whenever a group of women watch a video-recorded WBS sermon.

Because how we experience the Word has changed so dramatically from oral culture to print culture to the electronic age, today Christians must reflect on the meaning of their sacred text (Ong, 2000). "Man must situate himself in the universe today in terms of all this knowledge. He can no longer deal with his life-world so unreflexively as did earlier man" (Ong, 2000, p. 313). In addition, Christians must keep their sacred text alive through sound. "The word as sound signals interiority and mystery … holiness … [and] hope (Ong, 2000, p. 315). Hearing the Word spoken helps Christians understand its meaning, and in the context of today's visualist culture and technological world, we are "doing what we have to do to interpret [the Word] to *ourselves*" (Ong, 2000, p. 319-320, italics in original). Beth Moore also reminds WBS participants that the Word has been translated to English, so the original meaning could have changed in translation. Interpretation of the Word is thus a priority for today's Christians, and hearing it spoken promotes understanding and a sense of belonging within a religious group.

Contrary to the popular belief among deeply religious groups that technological culture distracts from the Word of God, Ong (2000) argues that it creates "deep sensitivity" (p. 292). In the electronic age, individuals have more personal contacts than ever before, and Christian groups that previously were isolated from each other are now in contact online. This has resulted in human presence and shared consciousness on a larger scale than ever before, so "the ground on which grace operates and God's presence is felt is enlarged" (Ong, 2000, p. 312). Mediated

WBS are part of this enlargement of Christian community, because every week the women see and recite Bible verses in unison with studio audiences of other Christian women and hear the speakers talk about the widespread WBS movement. The videos and workbooks create a sense of a national, interdenominational community of Christian women who are all interpreting the Bible individually to progress on their spiritual journey. New possibilities for communication in the electronic age have thus created a national religious community of Christians that are part of The Great Emergence, the postmodern reformation of Christianity (Tickle, 2008). In a meaning-making "conversation" that is being influenced by multiple denominations, there is a "new way of being Christian" that is ongoing, radical, relational, non-hierarchal and democratic (Tickle, 2008, p. 135). Change is possible because "religion is a social construct as well as an individual or private way of being and understanding" (Tickle, 2008, p. 33). The ability to blog about one's religious beliefs transcends geographical boundaries that previously isolated religious communities in local churches. Christian websites and blogs have united women participants of WBS yet also have provided a forum for controversy regarding Beth Moore's religious teachings and which types of Christians have the authority to interpret the Bible.

**The Word and Gender, Technology and Authority**

Beth Moore promotes herself and her WBS on her website, Living Proof Ministries. The website includes her biography, her blog, links to excerpts from her videos, and statements of her religious beliefs. All of her statements of religious beliefs begin with the word "We," which creates a sense of inclusion in a national community. For example, her statement of her beliefs regarding diversity and the interdenominational nature of her WBS is: "We actively support the unity of all believers eclipsing all denominational, economic, or ethnic diversities" (LPM, 2016).

Beth Moore's blog is similar to a monthly magazine feature by a columnist, as she posts a new essay every month. Her blog posts generally pertain to one of the following topics:

(a) her interpretations of the Bible (Esther, Ruth, and James);

(b) spirituality (compassion, prayer, and Bible study);

(c) being a mom (baby, housekeeping, and recipes);

(d) her family members (daughters Amanda and Melissa, who work in her ministry, and her son-in-law, Curtis, who is the pastor of Bayou City Fellowship Church); or

(e) her ministry (promoting her WBS or WBS written by other Christian women, or promoting her books).

The website that sells WBS learning materials is owned by LifeWay Press, the publishing company that produces Beth Moore's books and WBS series. When I researched this website, I learned that the leader kits that include everything needed to teach a WBS (workbooks, videos & instructor's guide) range in price from $69.99 to $179.99. The leader of our local group, Darlene, mentioned that another small group decided to collectively buy the leader's kit for the newest Beth Moore WBS for the church library because they were so eager to complete that series. At that point I realized that our group was completing older WBS series because the church already owned the videos and instructor's guide, so the only necessary expense was more workbooks. Darlene ordered the workbooks in advance, and each woman in the group paid for her own workbook, which cost only $12 to $15 each. Sales of WBS materials from the LifeWay Press website therefore perpetuate the continuation of these series in small groups because after the church (or group) buys the leader's kit, other women's groups can re-use the videos and instructor's guide for free and simply order more workbooks for a minimal cost per person. One can see how this trend has flourished in Protestant churches, because after the initial investment

in the leader's kit, other small groups of women re-use the videos and instructor's guide indefinitely without incurring any cost to the church.

In response to the proliferation of WBS in Protestant churches, many Christians have blogged about Beth Moore's teachings. Whenever the post was negative, hundreds of other Christians posted on the blog to either criticize or defend Beth Moore. As the timeline below shows, the controversy began in 2011 and continued until the time of this writing in 2016:

March 2011 – Christian author Karen Spears Zacharias posted an article on *Christianity Today* magazine's blog for women that said Beth Moore makes Bible study fun and called her a "female Billy Graham."

September 2011 – In an article on his blog, *Hacking Christianity*, United Methodist pastor Reverend Jeremy Smith called for United Methodist churches to ban Beth Moore's WBS because she misinterprets the Bible by quoting out of context and uses personal experience and psychology to interpret Scripture.

December 2012 – A 22-year-old pastor's wife in Wisconsin, Pam Terrell, announced on her blog, *The Secret Life of a Pastor's Wife*, that she was "Breaking Up with Beth Moore" because the Beth Moore WBS that she was using to teach a small group of farmer's wives was not effective in a northern U.S. farming region. The women in her small group did not relate to Beth Moore's Southern accent or her jokes about spending two hours styling her hair every day. Terrell also wrote that Beth Moore is a "false teacher" who misinterprets the Bible.

September 2013 – On his blog, *The King's Dale*, layperson Dale Wilson called for Christians to stop using Beth Moore's WBS. He argued that she is a "false prophet" because she

says that she receives messages from God and her Biblical interpretations are false because she "twists the Scripture" by quoting out of context and applying it to her own message.

November 2013 – On her blog, *Abandoned by Christ*, layperson Sunny Shell said that Beth Moore misinterprets the Bible and reported that Christian men have criticized Beth Moore for speaking at a religious conference because the audience was co-ed and her speech violated the Apostle Paul's edict that women should not exercise authority over men. Overwhelmed by too many comments to moderate, Shell shut down that thread on her blog three months later.

January 2015 – Beth Moore responded to the public controversy by posting an essay on her *Living Proof* blog entitled, "It's Hunting Season for Heretics." She called the abundance of hurtful comments in social media a witch hunt and challenged the Christian community to learn together by questioning one another respectfully and ethically. After an outpouring of support from 300 of her fans, she closed the thread because it was too time-consuming to moderate.

January 2015 – Beth Moore's private email exchange with Pam Terrell, the pastor's wife in Wisconsin who criticized her on her blog, was published on another blog, *Pulpit & Pen*. Working together behind the scenes, Terrell sent the email thread to layperson Dustin Germain. His article summarized the controversy over Beth Moore's teachings, supported Terrell's claim that Beth Moore is a "false teacher," and cited the names of Christian men who have publicly criticized her works as false prophecies.

February 2016 – A year later when Beth Moore's new television show on the TBN network was announced, Jeff Maples, the layperson editor of the same blog, *Pulpit & Pen*, called her a "false teacher" and criticized Beth Moore for preaching to audiences that include men and for predicting that God will unite all sectors of Christianity.

March 2016 – In a critique of Beth Moore's new television show, layperson Brandon C. Hines posted an article on his *Learning the Path* blog that said she is "unfit to teach God's Word" because she misinterprets Scripture and makes false prophesies.

This research shows that during the past five years, Christians have been arguing publicly in online forums regarding the issue of Biblical interpretation. The first attack on Beth Moore's credibility was written by a male pastor at a United Methodist Church (Smith, 2011). As a member of the clergy and as a spokesperson for the most influential Mainline Protestant denomination, Reverend Smith had *authority* in the national Christian community. When Smith called for *all* United Methodist churches to *ban* Beth Moore's teachings because she misinterprets the Bible, hundreds of Christians posted supportive and critical replies on his blog. The online social interaction that started the public national controversy over the credibility of Beth Moore's teachings therefore threatened serious damage to her reputation and ministry because it originated from a male clergy member who had authority in a Mainline Protestant church and in the national Christian community. In consideration of the tensions between Evangelical Protestants and Mainline Protestants regarding literalist vs. non-literalist interpretation of Scripture (Ammerman, 1982; Barnhart, 1993; Dixon et al., 1992; Jones, 2016), an attack from a conservative literalist Evangelical Protestant spokesperson would not have been surprising, but an attack from the pastor of a moderate Mainline Protestant denomination was surprising because United Methodists believe that anyone can interpret the Bible.

After a Mainline Protestant pastor sparked public controversy on his Christian blog by attacking Beth Moore's credibility, other Christians posted contentious opinions on their blogs that criticized her for misinterpreting the Bible (Germain, 2015; Hines, 2016; Maples, 2016;

Shell, 2013; Terrell, 2012; Wilson, 2013). Hundreds of Christians engaged in this public national debate by posting replies on both sides of the argument. Conservative literalists criticized her teachings because Beth Moore goes beyond literal interpretation, but moderate non-literalists supported her right to interpret and teach, even to audiences that include men. This debate fueled tensions between Christian men and women because Evangelical Protestants who interpret Scripture literally believe that whenever Beth Moore preaches to a co-ed audience, she violates the Apostle Paul's edict that women should not exercise authority over men (Maples, 2016; Shell, 2013). Public controversy regarding Beth Moore in the online national Christian community therefore created interpretive tensions and conflict between Evangelical and Mainline Protestants and Christian men and women.

Interpretive conflict in the national Christian community is rooted in cultural tensions. Evangelical Protestants who believe that men should have authority over women because they hold firmly to literalist interpretations of the Bible have criticized Mainline Protestants for choosing "American individualism and self-made spirituality over classical Christianity" (Jones, 2016, p. 201). As Mainline Protestants saw their congregations getting smaller, they adapted their theology to liberal stances that were more popular and successful in attracting new and younger members in a changing American culture that is based on individualism (Jones, 2016). Evangelical Protestants, however, fought against individualistic cultural influences that portray same-sex marriage as acceptable and encourage women to be autonomous. Led by James Dobson's *Focus on the Family* media campaign that published books on marriage and broadcast a syndicated radio talk show, these conservatives waged a "culture war" against the American media by advocating a return to the family structure of the 1950s in which the man was the leader of the family and the woman obeyed him (Jones, 2016, p. 139). As a result of this cultural

and political divide, theological differences in interpretation forced Christians to choose sides in the debate (Ammerman, 1982; Barnhart, 1993; Bartkowski, 1996; Dixon et al., 1992; Jones, 2016).

Beth Moore's non-literalist interpretations of the Bible ignite cultural and political denominational tensions in the national Christian community because she began her ministry in an Evangelical Protestant church (First Baptist Church, a megachurch in Houston), she teaches like a Mainline Protestant (says that anyone can interpret the Bible), she preaches to audiences that include men (at religious conferences), and she tells women to interpret the Bible. Her interdenominational WBS are controversial because she gives *all* women who participate in Bible studies, Evangelical and Mainline Protestants, the *authority* to interpret Scripture in new ways.

**First Global WBS Blog**

In 2013, Beth Moore used her Living Proof website to unite Christian women into an online global community when she invited women around the world to participate in the first ever blog for WBS participants. The women at my research site decided to participate in this venture, and the group leader, Darlene, was very excited about it. Entitled "Summer Siesta," this WBS combined workbooks and videos with social media. Beth Moore and Priscilla Shirer, another well-known WBS author, collaborated on this project. Beth Moore invited all women to complete Priscilla Shirer's "Gideon: Your Weakness, His Strength" WBS during that summer and also blog about it on Beth Moore's website (but the blog was optional, so women who were not technically savvy or did not have the time for extra homework were not pressured to do so). The blog featured an introductory video of a conversation between Beth Moore and Priscilla

Shirer as they sat on a couch, and in the rest of the videos that were posted on her blog, Beth Moore was sitting in an overstuffed chair as she talked to her global audience of women.

I posted on the blog, read other bloggers' posts, and compiled a corpus of 5,000 blog entries from June 2013 to August 2013. Each week Beth Moore posted a new video and four new questions on the blog, and WBS participants were asked to complete the reading assignments and homework in the "Gideon" workbook, then watch the new video that Beth Moore posted on her blog, and finally post comments that answered one or more of the four questions on the blog. It was, therefore, even more labor-intensive and time-consuming than a typical mediated WBS. In the online forum, women reflected on the readings in Priscilla Shirer's "Gideon" workbook, applied what they learned to their lives, and offered one another advice and emotional support. Altogether, global online communication on Beth Moore's blog supplemented the face-to-face communication in small local groups, where the participants gathered to discuss readings and homework in Priscilla Shirer's "Gideon" workbook and watch Priscilla Shirer's videos for that series.

Beth Moore and her WBS are controversial because she gives women the authority to interpret the Word by instructing them to do so in the homework. She doesn't tell women *what* to think; she challenges women *to* think. "She often concedes that there are different ways of considering the matter" (Zacharias, 2011, para. 10). By framing it as acceptable, ethical and admirable for women to interpret the Word of God, she gives them intellectual freedom. This intellectual freedom is also due to the privacy pact in small groups (what happens in this room stays in this room), because the women can share and discuss their interpretations without fear of being criticized by the (male) pastor of the church, their husbands, or others whom are not in the group.

The new mediated WBS format therefore includes writing, print and sound in a multimodal learning process that provides opportunities for women to interpret the Word as an isolated thinker, give powerful oral performances that interpret the Word in face-to-face communication, and be part of a group that responds to powerful oral performances that interpret the Word in visual media. As Christian author Karen Spears Zacharias wrote on the *Christianity Today* blog for women, Beth Moore makes Bible study interesting. "Bible study is like homework, right? And everyone knows, homework is, like, so B-O-R-I-N-G. Unless, you happen to be Beth Moore" (Zacharias, 2011, para. 4).

Next, I will explain each step in the WBS learning process and provide examples that will illustrate and analyze how the interplay of text, talk and video in these communicative practices created opportunities for co-constructing meaning in the group.

**The Isolated Thinker: Individual Learning in the Workbook**

Printed in color on thick, glossy paper, the workbooks were professionally designed and very reader-friendly. The inside cover of every workbook included a biography and photo of the Christian woman author who created it and a short introduction of its content. The text was written in a conversational tone and often included entertaining personal narratives about the author, her family, and her life experiences. The group completed seven mediated Bible studies for women during my fieldwork, and these series included the following workbooks: (a) *To Live Is Christ: The Life and Ministry of Paul*, by Beth Moore; (b) *Gideon: Your Weakness, God's Strength,* by Priscilla Shirer; (c) *The Patriarchs: Encountering the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob*, by Beth Moore; (d) *Lord, Teach Me to Pray: Practicing a Powerful Pattern of Prayer*, by Kay Arthur; (e) *Sacred Secrets: A Living Proof Live Experience*, by Beth Moore; (f) *Why Do*

*You Believe That? A Faith Conversation*, by Mary Jo Sharp; and (g) *Esther: It's Tough to Be a Woman,* by Beth Moore.

Most of the workbooks were 8 ½ x 11 inches in size and contained approximately 225 pages. The standard length for a mediated women's Bible study, which was established when Beth Moore introduced "To Live Is Christ" in 1997, is a 10-week study plan. The typical workbook included 10 chapters that were divided into five lessons per week, and the lessons in each week were numbered Day 1, Day 2, Day 3, Day 4 and Day 5. Each day's lesson required approximately 30-45 minutes of reading and homework, which included looking up Bible verses and paraphrasing or interpreting them, answering discussion questions, and writing personal reflections. Completing five lessons every week was therefore a significant commitment of time (2 ½ to 4 hours), thought, and energy. The personal reflection questions asked the reader to apply the learning material to her life. During the meeting when we discussed the homework, the group leader asked the women to share their personal reflections, but she also said that these should only be shared on a voluntary basis.

As women read the daily reading assignments and write answers to the homework questions, they can agree or disagree with the author's interpretations. For example, Beth Moore framed Jewish history as Christian history in "The Patriarchs: Encountering the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" WBS series, a 10-week study of Jewish history in the Book of Genesis. She argued that Jesus Christ was Jewish, so the patriarchs in Genesis were Christ's ancestors, and because Christians are in the family of Christ, Christians are studying their own religious family tree when they study Genesis. This was a frame of interpretation that was based on Moore's worldview as a Christian who is on a lifelong spiritual path that requires learning and Biblical interpretation.

The homework in the workbooks stimulates the reader to reflect on the meaning of Scripture and apply relevant concepts to her life. For example, the following homework questions in Beth Moore's "The Patriarchs" WBS series stimulated interpretation (question #1), personal reflection (question #2), and application to everyday life (question #3):

Sample homework question #1:

"What do you think this statement means?" ((Moore, 2005, p. 26)

_____

Sample homework question #2:

"Give an example from your experience." (Moore, 2005, p. 26)

_____

_____

Sample homework question #3, after a paragraph in which the author reminds her readers that God met the needs of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and reassures her readers that God will also meet their needs:

In this season of your life, what is your greatest need? (p. 30)

_____

The text in the workbook therefore educates and encourages the reader to be strong in her faith yet also gives her opportunities to interpret the Bible in new ways. In the above examples, the reader interpreted the meaning of Scripture while learning about Jewish history in the Book of Genesis and reflected on the relevance of this chapter to her life. Through the combination of reading and homework, the reader learned about historical religious figures and their problems,

derived meaning from how their needs were met, and was reminded of a core Christian belief, that there is no need in their lives that is too great for God to meet.

Beth Moore's WBS were the most time-consuming series because each week's homework (5 days) required looking up approximately 25 Bible verses (5 per day) and answering 50 questions (10 per day). As a longtime participant-observer, I can attest that after spending 4 to 5 hours alone reading the workbook and completing the homework, I looked forward to the meeting where I would be able to share my homework answers in the group, hear other women share their answers, discuss the meaning of the new material and relevance to daily life, and tell stories that illustrate the relevance of the Word to daily life.

**Co-constructing Practical Theology: Group Discussion and Application of Workbook**

As the following examples will show, the group's communicative practices during the first hour of the meeting as they discussed the homework created opportunities for meaning-making in co-constructed interpretation. The group leader led each discussion by introducing the theme of that week's lesson plan and then reading homework questions aloud and waiting for the members to volunteer to read aloud the answers they had written in the workbook. Themes in the workbook arose in group discussions because homework questions asked the reader to reflect on the meaning of a Bible verse and/or how it applied to their everyday lives. Whenever this happened, the women took turns reading aloud their answers and sometimes they elaborated on their reasons for writing them. Elaborations were often stories that related to the topic, and after each story, the group discussed it and co-constructed interpretations of its meaning through framing. The group discussions about the reading and homework assignments in the workbook were therefore oral performances that included the interplay of text and talk from current and past lesson plans and meetings. I will analyze sample group discussions using the same format

that was used to analyze excerpts in Chapter 3: (a) line-by-line analysis of the excerpt; (b) patterned ways of speaking in the group; and (c) tensions that arose in the talk.

**Interpretive conflict and reframing of wifely submission**

The following conversation occurred while the group was discussing the homework for Beth Moore's (1997) "To Live Is Christ: The Life and Ministry of Paul" WBS series. The homework in the workbook for that week instructed the women participants to interpret the verses about wifely submission in the New Testament of the Bible:

> Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. (NIV Ephesians 5:22-24)

The homework in the workbook instructed women participants to look up and read these Bible verses, paraphrase them in one sentence, pray, and reflect on their meaning. In the workbook, Beth Moore did not provide a contemporary interpretation of these Bible verses; she simply stated what she believes submission is not in the context of Christian marriage: "Submission does not mean slavery … Submission does not mean women are under the authority of men in general … Submission does not mean inequality" (Moore, 1997, p. 186). Text in the workbook and the Bible therefore created the opportunity for individual interpretation of Scripture prior to the meeting, and the group's communicative practice of discussing the homework during the first hour of the meeting provided the opportunity to talk about this controversial issue. In the following conversation, the speakers are: (a) Darlene (D), the group

leader; (b) Karen (K), the retired grandmother; (c) Melanie (M), the nurse; and (d) Joy (J), the Bible Studies coordinator who worked at the church where the meetings were held:

**Excerpt 4a. Group discussion of "submit"**

D: I have *never* submitted to my husband in terms of obedience. I have had a career and have done just fine by myself! So I have never considered myself in this light.

K: The Scripture also tells the husbands to love their wives, giving themselves up as Christ gave Himself up for us. Then your submission is not as a slave but as a partner. If the husband does his part, then there is a loving relationship, and it is easier to submit.

M: It is especially hard for a wife whose husband is not a Christian, because why do I have to submit? He's not even going to church! He doesn't read the Bible, so there's no way he can make a decision. So it's easier if there is a partnership with Jesus.

J: You see a lot of situations where the wife is the religious leader. She's the one who takes the family to church. You see a lot of that.

K: To be submissive means to cooperate with someone else voluntarily out of love and respect for God first and that person second. Submission is mutual. Even when it is one-sided, an expression of submission can be an effective Christian strategy.

D: The thing that struck me about that section is how many women were put off by that? How many other pieces of our Christian Bible would we choose to cut out

20 of our life to make our life easier?

The first member of the group to offer an opinion about this controversial issue was the group leader, Darlene. She had more authority than the other participants because she was in her role as our teacher, albeit as a volunteer rather than in her usual paid substitute K-12 teacher context. As a wife who works outside of the home, Darlene framed her outright rejection of "submit" as *individual autonomy* that was based on her status as a professional teacher who has always contributed to the household income ("I have had a career and have done just fine by myself! L1,2). By saying that she has *never* obeyed her husband ("I have *never* submitted to my husband in terms of obedience" L1), the group leader was giving them mentoring advice that set the tone for other women to reject the Apostle Paul's edict for married women.

Karen, a retired grandmother, also gave mentoring advice, but she reframed the meaning of the word submission ("not as a slave but as a partner" L5,6). She never worked outside of the home, but she worked for her husband in their home office as his secretary throughout his career as a traveling entrepreneur. The subject of slavery arose in the discussion because the participants had read it in the workbook. In rejecting the idea that submission is slavery, Karen agreed with the author of the workbook, who wrote, "Submission does not mean slavery" (Moore, 1997, p. 186). After Darlene rejected submission as obedience, Karen reframed submission as being a partner to your husband, which gave her and other wives *autonomy as partners* in marriage.

Another woman who worked outside of the home as a professional nurse, Melanie, then rejected the idea that a Christian wife should submit to a non-Christian husband ("why do I have to submit? He's not even going to church! He doesn't read the Bible, so there's no way he can

make a decision" L8-10). Instead of joining Darlene's argument that working women should not submit based on their professional status and income, Melanie used religious differences as a reason to not submit to one's husband. This was troubles talk that gave Christian women who are married to non-Christian men *individual autonomy* based on their religious practices; because they attend church and read the Bible, they can make better decisions than their husbands.

The only woman in the group who worked at the church, Joy, then continued the troubles talk by giving a supportive response toward Melanie's argument ("You see a lot of situations where the wife is the religious leader" L12). Joy worked outside of the home as a part-time administrator of all the Bible study groups at this church, so she was in her workplace. She typically spoke on behalf of the pastor and the church, so she was the church authority in the group. In her professional role, she had the authority to comment on the perceived problem that many husbands do not attend church or read the Bible, so the wife has to be the religious leader of the family. Her response was neutral, however, because she did not comment on the meaning of submit, which was the topic of the conversation.

Redirecting the conversation back to mentoring advice about the original topic, Karen then defined submission as mutual cooperation ("To be submissive means to cooperate with someone voluntarily out of love and respect for God first and that person second. Submission is mutual" L14,15). Building on her first comment in lines 4-7, when she reframed submission as being a partner, she enhanced her definition by adding that both partners should cooperate with each other. Yet Karen also addressed the issue of husbands who do not mutually cooperate with their wives as partners ("Even when it is one-sided, an expression of submission can be an effective Christian strategy" L15-17). This conflicted with everything that Darlene and Melanie had said up to that point because their comments had given the women individual autonomy as

professional women or practicing Christians. No one agreed with Karen regarding her new definition of submission, but the fact that no one criticized her interpretation shows the relational aspect of the talk in this group.

With no consensus in the group because Darlene and Melanie had rejected the traditional interpretation of submit as obedience and Karen had reframed it as mutual cooperation in a partnership, Darlene then closed the topic by reflecting on the issue of wifely submission in the Bible for women in today's society ("how many women were put off by that?" L18,19). This troubles talk raised the issue of how difficult it is to be a practicing Christian in an American culture that values individualism and autonomy. As group leader, she then wrapped up the discussion by asking: "How many other pieces of our Christian Bible would we choose to cut out of our life to make our life easier?" (L19,20). This question problematized choosing only aspects of Christianity that are easiest to practice and rejecting aspects of doctrine that are difficult to practice in everyday life. Characteristic of The Great Emergence, this involves combining aspects of different denominations into "a mélange of things cherry-picked … and put together – some would say cobbled together" (Tickle, 2008, p. 134). This practice is seen by literalists as a problem because it is changing Christianity into something a social construct that is not based on Scripture and is "no longer Protestant" (Tickle, 2008, p. 134).

**Electronically-Mediated Emotional Intimacy: Group Learning in Video**

After the group discussed the homework in the workbook, they watched the video for that week and took notes in the workbook about the content of the video. Everyone wrote the missing words for the main points in the video in the fill-in-the-blank outline that was on the last page of that week's chapter in the workbook, which was challenging because the complete sentence that included the missing word(s) was only shown on the screen for about five seconds.

One had to listen to the speaker carefully and watch the screen in order to hear and/or see the missing word(s) so she could fill in the blanks in the outline. Whenever a woman "missed" a word or two because she was looking around the room, gazing out the window, or simply not paying attention (and I was guilty of this as well), it was a norm in the group to quietly lean over to the woman who was sitting next to you and look at her outline. This "cheating" was perfectly acceptable, and the woman who had the answers often moved her workbook toward the woman who still needed the answers to make coping them even easier. We therefore helped each other fill in the outlines in the workbook in a supportive learning atmosphere.

In addition to filling in the outlines for the main points of the video, the longtime members of the group also took notes whenever the speaker said something they found interesting and wanted to remember. After being in the group for several weeks, I noticed that newcomers to the group only filled in the outline for the video, but the longtime members also wrote hand-written notes about talk in the video which was not on the outline, such as Beth Moore's metaphor that "Being a mother *is* a ministry" (Fieldnote on 10/31/13). Taking copious notes in the workbook was a norm in the group that was learned over time by watching the other women in the group as we watched the video.

Another communicative norm that newcomers learned over time was the ritual of reciting in unison during the video whenever the speaker prompted her studio audience to repeat what she had just said. This was a standard feature in most of the videos that we watched, and it initially made me uncomfortable because I had not recited in unison in a classroom since elementary school. Reciting in unison makes learners focus on a key phrase that the speaker wants to emphasize, and in order to participate in this WBS ritual, one has to listen very carefully and be ready to repeat on command at the same time that everyone else is doing so. At first, I

stayed silent because I didn't want to blurt out the key phrase at the wrong time and embarrass myself. As I became more confident, however, I repeated phrases in unison along with the group. Whenever we did this, I felt a sense of unity with every woman in the classroom as Christians and as learners. "Sound unites groups of living beings as nothing else does" (Ong, 2000, p. 122). This feeling of unity was particularly strong whenever we repeated a Bible verse in unison because *speaking* the Word *simultaneously* in a group of Christians was more intense and powerful than simply hearing the speaker recite Scripture (Ong, 2000). Reciting the Word in unison as a group in response to the prompts on the screen while watching the speaker in the video was engaging because it combined oral culture with today's visualist culture. The visual element made it seem as if the speaker was in our classroom interacting with us face to face. The ritual of reciting in unison while watching the WBS videos thus engaged the participants through oral performance that was an aspect of communicative competence in this group (Hymes, 1972c).

The content and design of the workbooks were similar for the four authors of the WBS series in which I was a participant (Beth Moore, Priscilla Shirer, Kay Arthur, and Mary Jo Sharp), but their videos were different. Each author had her own style of public speaking, and her style set the tone for our learning experience. For example, most of the speakers instructed us to repeat key phrases in unison, but Beth Moore sometimes made that ritual more fun by having us turn toward the woman we were sitting next to and say the phrase to her. Instead of repeating a phrase such as "Pay attention to what you hear" while looking at the TV, it was face-to-face interpersonal communication. Next, I will describe the differences between the four authors' videos and how those differences influenced the learning process.

**Beth Moore: The charismatic girlfriend**

Watching Beth Moore videos was exciting because you never knew what she might say or do. She is a dramatic public speaker who surprises her studio audiences and viewers by yelling unexpectedly, using hand and arm gestures for emphasis, or suddenly grabbing a hidden prop that is a clever metaphor for her interpretation. Her stories are always engaging, but you never know if her narratives will have a heartwarming or heartbreaking ending. Women relate to Moore because she has a "down-to-earth" image as a friendly Southern woman who has big hair and a big heart. She calls her studio audiences and viewers "girlfriends" and I felt like her girlfriend because she used that term so often in her videos and revealed so much personal information about herself and her family. Her persona is that of a caring mother and person who has struggled throughout her life, and after hearing her personal stories about hardship, I cared about her.

An experienced public speaker who has been performing to huge audiences in arenas for decades, Moore's public speaking style is polished and professional. She accomplishes what is perhaps the greatest challenge in mediated communication in that she makes the viewer feel like she is talking directly to you. As an entertainer, she always looks beautiful, with flawless makeup, "poofy" blond hair that is expertly styled, and conservative yet fashionable clothing that would be suitable to wear to church. Her videos always began with her standing in a scenic place such as a beach on a seashore, and her stages were always elegant and cheerful. For example, her stage in the "To Live Is Christ" series was illuminated with bright blue and peach lighting and decorated with white flowers and white Grecian columns in the background. Watching Beth Moore videos was a suspenseful, engaging, and enjoyable ritual in the group.

**Priscilla Shirer: The tech-savvy theologian**

Beth Moore never studied the Bible formally, but her mentee, Priscilla Shirer, holds a master's degree in Biblical studies from Dallas Theological Seminary. As a public speaker, Shirer was dynamic like Moore but her style differed in several ways. First, Shirer dressed more casually. During the first video in her "Gideon: Your Weakness, God's Strength" WBS series, she wore slacks and a long cardigan sweater, and one of the women in our group said, "Priscilla looks preppy." Second, the set of her stage was dark blue and medieval with crossed swords mounted on the walls in the background. Compared to Moore's stages, it looked like a castle in the Middle Ages. Shirer is a beautiful young married African-American mother of three boys, and she told heartwarming stories about her family. She incorporated a lot of humor into her lessons, but she also was very serious at times. When she was serious, she gestured with her arms, and the ethnically diverse women in her auditorium audience regularly responded verbally with affirmative utterances such as, "Uh huh," "Um hmm," "That's right," and "Yeah." Moore's audiences were typically quiet while she lectured, other than repeating key phrases on command and laughing when she said something funny. In comparison, Shirer's studio audiences were more engaged and interactive. Also, instead of beginning and ending each video in a light-hearted, happy way in Moore's style, Shirer stood in darkness in front of a bonfire, and at the end of her lesson, she held an old-fashioned torch in her hand, like the historical characters in the Book of Gideon. It was a wooden club, and she held it in the bonfire until it ignited, lifted it up in the air above her head, looked seriously into the camera, and walked away. Symbolically, she said that she did this to ignite her passion and our passion for our faith.

From a technological perspective, Shirer was more advanced than Moore because Shirer referenced computer technology and social media. Instead of saying the norm, "open your

Bibles to [name of a book in the Bible, such as Judges]," she said "open your Bible, or iPad or iPhone to Judges." While watching the video, I looked around the classroom and noticed that Joy was looking at her iPad and didn't even have a Bible with her. Shirer also mentioned that our workbook included "hash tags" that she wrote on Twitter for a year and a half while studying Gideon, and at the bottom of each day's lesson, there was a blank space for us to write our own hash tag, our one reflective sentence about what we learned that day. Then she invited us to "tweet" on Twitter about this Bible study! Shirer was the most tech-savvy WBS author, and her videos made the learning environment more modern.

During the WBS meetings, I occasionally saw Joy, Darlene, and a few of the other longtime members looking up Bible verses on their smart phones or iPads during the group discussions. While everyone else was flipping through their Bibles to find the verse that was referenced in the homework, these women held an electronic device on their lap and found the same verse using the Google search engine or by scrolling through an electronic version of the Bible that they had downloaded. This practice seemed strange to me because going to Bible study without a Bible seemed akin to a band student going to band class without a musical instrument; you forgot to bring something that you need in order to participate. Shirer, however, had said that it was okay to use electronic devices, which framed this practice as socially acceptable.

I did not use electronic devices to look up Bible verses during my fieldwork, but since then I have used the Google search engine to find Bible verses on my smart phone in order to save time while analyzing my data and writing my dissertation. When one uses technology to read the Bible, the medium changes the experience of reading the Word. Instead of touching a sacred book and seeing the verse in its context, you read a single sentence on a white screen.

Because touch creates a sense of reality (Ong, 2000), reading the Word online for me feels less real than holding a sacred book. Using Google also makes looking up a Bible verse feel more academic, as if you are looking up a fact in an online encyclopedia. It makes the religious practice of reading Scripture less intense and reverent for the learner. Access to online text creates an electronic shortcut to Scripture, and because the Bible verse is often followed by an expert interpretation, it eliminates the need for clergy to interpret the meaning of the Word. This is an example of interpretive authority that further changes one's relationship to clergy because one has the autonomy to access religious text and interpretations of it quickly as the "isolated thinker" (Ong, 2000, p. 54). This is another indication of how Bible study is changing; it is becoming more *mediated* as tech-savvy Christians such as Shirer advocate using electronic devices instead of reading the Bible.

**Kay Arthur: The wise grandmother**

In stark contrast to watching a young woman teach the Bible in a medieval castle, watching Kay Arthur's videos was like visiting someone's Christian grandmother in her lovely home on her private country estate. Arthur began her first Bible study for a youth group and co-founded a global ministry, Precept Ministries International, with her husband during the 1970s, so she has been teaching the Bible for many decades. Her husband is a pastor, and she looks, dresses and talks like a pastor's wife, prim and proper in every way. At the beginning and end of every video, she was interviewed formally by a woman journalist in front of her house while sitting on upscale patio furniture on an expansive and well manicured green lawn. In her weekly sermon, she preached the gospel from a formal sitting room in her house.

Watching Arthur's videos was an initially uncomfortable learning experience for several reasons. First, these video settings were very different from Moore and Shirer's stage settings.

Arthur was not in a public auditorium addressing an audience of women who responded verbally; she was sitting at home talking into a camera. Second, the formal interviews with the journalist portrayed a celebrity image, not a down-to-earth mom and girlfriend to whom women could easily relate. Third, some of Arthur's main points were very basic; for example, a main point in her Introduction video was: "God has given you a book, the _____." (One did not have to watch the video to know that the answer was "Bible.") Conversely, Moore and Shirer made profound interpretations that were based on scholarly sources, which enhanced the learning experience. Fourth, each time Arthur's answers to a fill-in-the-blank sentence were shown on the screen, the viewer was startled by a strange noise that was annoying. One of the women in the group called this a "weird whooshing noise." Fifth, whenever Arthur addressed her viewers, she called us "Beloved." After watching one of the videos, a woman in the group said, "I've never been called 'Beloved' so many times." That term seemed overly formal because we were accustomed to being called "girlfriend" by Beth Moore.

Kay Arthur did, however, tell interesting personal narratives that were poignant and memorable; she even wept in a video while telling one story that was particularly heartbreaking. Her stories were entertaining, and over time we acclimated to her formal speaking style, her video settings, and the whooshing noise that signaled the viewer to read answers on the screen. During the last day of the "Lord, Teach Me to Pray" series, the group decided that we liked Kay Arthur and learned a lot from her sage advice, but we were all eager to begin a Beth Moore WBS series the following week. "I *miss* Beth Moore," Darlene said.

**Mary Jo Sharp: The academic lecturer**

In another WBS series that was out of our comfort zone, we watched a former atheist teach us how to argue logically about religion! Mary Jo Sharp is a theologian who holds a

master's degree in Christian apologetics from Biola University, and she is married to a youth pastor. Watching her videos was like watching a typical class that had been televised; she stood behind a podium in a small classroom and addressed women who were sitting in rows of individual desks. Hence, it was not a church-like atmosphere like the auditorium seating in Moore's and Shirer's videos. Attractive in a clean-cut, girl-next-door way, Sharp looked, dressed and acted like a professor who was giving a lecture in a lecture hall and exemplified an academic professional. The women in her classroom did not talk. Occasionally she told a joke and a few of them laughed, but overall the atmosphere was a serious learning environment.

As a teacher, Sharp adhered to her carefully scripted lesson plan and did not tell personal stories. She framed Jesus Christ as a teacher: "When you follow the greatest teacher who ever lived, how can you not love learning?" (Fieldnote on 6/19/14). She did not use gestures, and her tone of voice was steady as she presented arguments and advice for apologetics, talking to non-believers about religion. In the Introduction video for her "Why Do You Believe That?" WBS series, Sharp argued that Jesus was effective in persuasion because he used reasoned argumentation. She also told us to argue that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is supported by scientific evidence, and historical documentation supports many of the events in the Bible. Most of her videos were advice about the importance of listening and arguing calmly when one talks about religion. For example, she offered dos and don'ts, such as: "Don't tell atheists what to think" and "Gently point out the flaws in the atheist's reasoning" (Fieldnote on 7/18/14).

Learning from this WBS author's videos was more like learning in a public school. She did not ask us to repeat any phrases in unison. Like a professor, she suggested additional books for us to read. Watching her videos seemed like work because they did not include the

storytelling practices, secret-sharing, and emotional bonding that lifted our spirits and unified the group when we were watching WBS videos of Moore, Shirer and Arthur.

## Co-constructing Practical Theology: Group Discussion and Application of Video

After we watched the video of the WBS author, we spent the next 10 to 15 minutes of the meeting talking about it, similar to the way people discuss a movie they have just seen together. Often we talked about the most surprising aspects of the video, such as Beth Moore's horrific story about a Christian martyr who had been tortured with a tongue-screw and burned at the stake as her young son watched her die. Other times we talked about our favorite part of the video, such as Beth Moore's sifter, which she used as a prop on stage and as a metaphor to explain how God purges us of the bad aspects of our character (separates the wheat from the chaff). Whenever we disagreed with something the WBS author had said in the video, we discussed the issue. The following examples of interpretive conflict and reframing will illustrate meaning-making in group discussion about the WBS video.

### Interpretive conflict and reframing of fear

During Beth Moore's "Esther: It's Tough to be a Woman" series, several members of the group said that they disagreed with the WBS author's stance against fear. In the video, Beth Moore said that we need to overcome our fears: "You *can* be brave. And girlfriend, I am talking to *you*." She said that a quantitative study found that the most frequent command in the Bible is "don't be afraid." Then she said: "Somebody tell me what the most frequent command in the Bible is?" The women in the group repeated in unison, "Don't be afraid." After we watched the video, however, the group discussed the issue of fear. The speakers in the following discussion were: (a) Melanie (M), the nurse; (b) Karen (K), the retired grandmother; (c) Carol (C), a young stay-at-home mom; and (d) Anne (A), another young stay-at-home mom.

**Excerpt 4b. Group discussion of fear**

M: I think fear is good. I think it is what you do with the fear, because I think fear is healthy. It helps keep things in perspective … unless it consumes you, or cripples you, or you know freezes you or whatever. That is not good, at least for me … those little underlying fears, that is why.

K: We need a little fear, just like our kids. They need a little bit of fear of strangers but we don't want it to be crippling, where they don't want to go out.

C: That is a hard thing, even now they say, "I thought you told us not to talk to strangers. You talk to everybody in this mall." I, being nice, you know, you know, whether it is just, "Hi, how are you, thank you so much." Or whatever, you know …

M: Some wisdom comes from aging. The aging process allows you to discern when somebody is being thoughtful or evil. Where younger children, we worry that they won't discern that.

C: Right, right. Exactly.

K: If you have no fear, you drive over the speed limit, drive recklessly, you know …

M: Walk with any stranger that says, "Come on, get in the van."

A: Yeah, exactly.

K: I think the most, the aspect of fear is the lack of control. That is where a lot of our fear comes in, we are not in control. Then going back to realizing He's in control, but we have to give that up to lose some of that fear. It's like our grandchildren, we are fearful of something happening and you can say to yourself, "He's in charge." But you know, even your own kids, it's still hard to let go of that.

23 M: To not want to be in the director's chair.

24 K: Right. Exactly.

This discussion was interpretive conflict because the women in the classroom disagreed with Beth Moore, the author of the workbook and speaker in the video. Moore has authority in the national Christian community, but because she was not in our classroom, the participants could contradict her without a confrontation; the intellectual autonomy to reinterpret is thus inherent in the mediated learning process. Even after repeating her catch phrase ("Don't be afraid") in unison during the video, the women in the group disagreed and reframed the issue of fear in practical ways that applied to their daily lives as mothers and grandmothers. Repeating phrases in unison therefore did not signify agreement; it was simply a communicative practice that was normalized through long-term conditioning.

Melanie began the discussion by bringing up the topic of fear and reframing it as "good" and "healthy" because it "helps keep things in perspective" (L1,2). This was a practical way to see fear, versus Beth Moore's advice to not fear anything. Melanie also, however, added that fear is not beneficial if it "consumes" or "cripples" or "freezes you" (L2,3). Crippling means debilitating in this context, and her reference to "freezes" invoked the image of people who have too much fear and develop dysfunctional neuroses because of it (L2,3). Melanie then clarified that she meant that "those little underlying fears" are "not good" (L3,4). Her comments were mentoring advice to other Christian women regarding practicing their religion.

Karen supported Melanie's reinterpretation of fear and continued to give mentoring advice to the group, but she applied the topic of fear to motherhood by bringing up the subject of children. This was a typical pattern for talk in this group; while discussing religion, one of the

mothers would use children as examples ("just like our kids. They need a little bit of fear of strangers" L5) and the discussion would expand from religion to religion *and* motherhood vis-à-vis how to apply Christian religion to being a mom. This is another example of *practical theology* in an *interpretive community* because the women were reinterpreting their religion in more practical ways in terms of their daily lives.

One of the young stay-at-home moms, Carol, then joined the conversation by elaborating on how the common practice of teaching one's children "not to talk to strangers" caused tension in her family when her children held her accountable for talking to strangers while shopping with them in a mall (L7,8). This was troubles talk about striving to be a good mother (Hayes, 1996) in a society where parents tell their children not to talk to strangers but it is a politeness ritual to engage in small talk with cashiers ("Hi, how are you, thank you so much" L9). Melanie then continued to give mentoring advice, but this advice was specific to being a mother. She knew that Carol's children were young, so she spoke to the issue of fear as it applied to Carol's children: "Where younger children, we worry" (L12). This was another pattern in the group's talk; one of the younger moms would state a problem that she had as a mother, and one or more of the older women would give her mentoring advice.

As often happened, the discussion then segued into talk that was solely about being a mom. While talking about fear of strangers, Melanie said that people gain "wisdom" as they age that "allows you to discern when somebody is being thoughtful or evil" (L11,12). This framed teenagers (older children) as better able to protect themselves from strangers who intend to harm them. Many of the women in the group had teenage daughters and sons, so this mentoring advice was directed to them. Yet it also included troubles talk, as the women cited dangers in today's society ("If you have no fear, you drive over the speed limit, drive recklessly" and "Walk

with any stranger that says, 'Come on, get in the van'" L15,16). These fears were realistic dangers in the major city where the participants lived, so these were practical fears for mothers.

After the women discussed their fears as mothers, Karen redirected the topic back to religion by saying that fear stems from "the lack of control" but "He's in control" (L19). "He" refers to God, so this was an affirmation of faith that God is in control of our lives. "It's like our grandchildren, we are fearful of something happening and you can say to yourself, 'He's in charge'" (L20-22). This was mentoring advice to other Christian mothers that related to religion and motherhood, and it framed trust in God as the solution to realistic fears that are common among mothers and grandmothers. Melanie then supported Karen's affirmation of faith by providing a metaphor for God's control over our lives, "the director's chair" (L23). This was another pattern in the group's talk; at the end of a discussion, someone would give an affirmation of faith that closed the topic.

The mediated WBS learning process therefore provides opportunities for intellectual autonomy and interpretive conflict as the women discuss and decide whether to agree or disagree with the author's interpretations, and the group's reframing of fear in this discussion is another example of a co-constructed reinterpretation (some fear *is* beneficial) that was *practical theology*. It had practical application because it validated their realistic fears about their children and grandchildren yet also offered religion as a coping strategy for managing fear in their lives (God is "in control" L19).

**Reframing of the "good" mother**

Beth Moore often tells self-deprecating jokes in her videos about how she does not meet expectations for the "good" mother in society (Hays, 1996) because she is so busy. The women in her studio audiences and the women in our local group laughed at these jokes. Although I am

not currently a mother, I related to these jokes and the lack of time issue for mothers because I worked full-time while helping raise my stepson; after getting home from a long day at the office, I started my second shift as the cook, housekeeper, and nurturer of the family (Hochschild, 1989). I learned firsthand that society's expectations for mothers can be unrealistically high because there is never enough time. The women in the Bible study discussed this issue after watching the last video in Moore's (2013) "Sacred Secrets" WBS series. Throughout this series, lack of time was a theme for not spending enough time in prayer, and closet was a metaphor for time alone in a private place where one can pray undisturbed. At the end of the last video, Moore wrapped up the series by emphasizing the importance of prayer and telling Christian women, "Go into your prayer closets." That meant that women should make time for prayer because it is a priority.

After the video stopped, Darlene began this lengthy discussion about religion and motherhood by telling a story about not having enough time to pray or relax with her daughters when they were younger. The following excerpt from this conversation includes six speakers: (a) Darlene (D), the group leader; (b) Elizabeth (E), a retired grandmother; (c) Gloria (G), a young stay-at-home mom; (d) Denise (DE), a stay-at-home mom; (e) Jane (JA), a stay-at-home mom; and (f) Karen (K), a retired grandmother. Some lines have been omitted to eliminate redundancy and emphasize how the conversation transitioned between troubles talk and mentoring advice, and group (GP) laughter appears in brackets:

**Excerpt 4c. Group discussion of the "good" mother**

D: When they would come and hug me, I'd be, Okay. Here's your hug. I'm on to the next thing. And I finally was like wow. I realized that I was always the first one pulling away from the hug. So I think I made a New Year's resolution that I

would not be the person who broke up the hug. Because I'm like … I was sending the message, "I am too busy to hug you. Go away."

E: It's true.

D: Yeah.

GP: [laughter]

D: But I'm sad because you get in the, the, the, the … busyness of all the other stuff that you just like … and your prayers turn into a, "Okay God. I have 15 minutes and let's make this really, really good."

G: And that's how you get there. Like how … because I do that all the time with Christine. She's like, "Mom. Sit down, sit down." Like, I'm thinking about, that I got to cook dinner, and then I don't slow down, and like that should be the most important thing, but I don't make it the most important thing.

D: It's like a really, a really big wake-up call in our life for that to, to become important.

DE: There's so many other things all day that can keep you busy.

After Darlene proposed that the busyness of trying to meet social expectations for mothers can interfere with prayer time, the other women in the group agreed and talked about their struggles to find a balance between maintaining a clean house and spending quality time with their children (lines 19-54 omitted). Denise then switched from troubles talk to mentoring advice and said that after her first child was born, her mother gave her a book about this topic that emphasized the importance of spending quality time with children versus cleaning the house.

For example, the book recommended switching gears if you are cleaning and your children ask you to watch a movie with them.

DE: They don't want you doing the dishes and watching the movie. They want you laying on the couch with them and watching the movie.

As the discussion continued (lines 57-71 omitted), Denise also compared making quality time for your children to making time for prayer, which is quality time spent with God. Jane said that mothers also have to think of what they are modeling for their children in terms of priorities:

JA: The same habits, you know, that clean house that was … you know really important to your parent or parents, and then I picked up the same habit. And then maybe your child does that because they do what you do. And … but when you sit down and watch … drop everything and watch that movie, well your children will probably do that with their children too because that's what mom did with them.

G: My … it was really important for my family to have a clean house. Be presentable for company and all. Me, my kids come first. I don't care about my house being clean and I want them to know that they're a priority and hopefully they'll establish that with their family.

After more discussion (lines 82-93 omitted), Karen offered advice regarding how to accomplish both objectives, maintain a clean house and spending quality time with children. She said that whenever she is babysitting at her daughter's house, because her daughter works long hours at her job, she asks her grandsons to help fold laundry.

K: We do it together. And I think that if we do it together, they pull out their things and they pile them up and that kind of thing and they help put it away. It's done quicker. And then you do something else together … it is hard to balance. But the kids need to realize that some of these things have to be done … then they'll understand, you know, the burden on you also.

D: I think that's been my learning. It's that if I take the time for the girls to do the sit and watch the show and do the never-ending hug and listen to them at the end of the day … they're much more willing to help me and they're much more receptive to my moods and they know that sometimes mommy just gets twitchy.

GP: [laughter]

D: I get twitchy … and they're like, "Mommy, you're twitchy." And then they'll know that they … they come and help. And it's like that with God time … that time in the secret that Beth Moore is calling it, it's like working out. It's like you said, Denise, it … you crave it. You can't live without it. Bless you. It is your lifeline and I get twitchy when I haven't taken that time. Because nine of out ten times when I'm twitchy, it's because I haven't done that (pray).

The group leader, Darlene, started this discussion by relating the lack of prayer time to being a busy mother. Once again the two common topics of religion and motherhood were intertwined, so this was another example of the women using their children as examples when talking about their religious practices and beliefs. As an experienced mother of two teenagers, Darlene shared her insight that being a nurturer is important: "I realized that I was always the first one pulling away from the hug … I was sending the message, 'I am too busy to hug you.

Go away'" (L2-5). This was troubles talk and mentoring advice because she admitted to not being a good mother yet told the group how she corrected the problem: "I made a New Year's resolution that I would not be the person who broke up the hug" (L3,4).

After another woman in the group, Elizabeth, agreed ("It's true" L6) and the group laughed, Darlene changed the tone from humorous back to serious ("But I'm sad" L9) and related her busyness to a lack of prayer time, which was the theme of the religious video that we had watched ("your prayers turn into a, 'Okay God. I have 15 minutes'" L10). The group's two most recent WBS series, Kay Arthur's "Lord, Teach Me to Pray" and Beth Moore's "Sacred Secrets," had focused on the importance of spending time in prayer every day, so this was troubles talk about a problem that many Christian women experience. One of the younger stay-at-home moms, Gloria, then related the lack of time problem back to motherhood: "I do that all the time with Christine. She's like, 'Mom. Sit down, sit down" (L12,13). This continued the troubles talk about motherhood because she admitted that she focuses on tasks instead of spending quality time with her young daughter: "then I don't slow down, and like that should be the most important thing" (L14,15). Darlene then transitioned back to giving mentoring advice to the other mothers about nurturing: "It's like a really, a really big wake-up call in our life for that to, to become important" (L16,17).

The next segment of the discussion (L18-54) was a series of indirect complaints that co-constructed a list of the responsibilities mothers are expected to balance for their families. The women in the group said that they never had enough time to fulfill these social expectations. Denise then transitioned from troubles talk to motherhood advice that she had read in a book. "They don't want you doing the dishes and watching the movie. They want you laying on the

couch with them and watching the movie" (L55,56). This mentoring advice emphasized the importance of spending quality time with one's children vs. doing household chores.

The next two speakers, Jane and Gloria, extended the mentoring advice about motherhood to parental modeling. Jane said that she learned the importance of keeping a clean house from her parents but hopes her children will value quality time more than a clean house when they become parents: "when you sit down and watch … drop everything and watch that movie, well your children will probably do that with their children too because that's what mom did with them" (L74-77). Gloria then said that she does not prioritize a clean house: "Me, my kids come first. I don't care about my house being clean and I want them to know that they're a priority and hopefully they'll establish that with their family" (L79-81). Both Jane and Gloria prioritized quality time with their children as more important than a clean house.

The retired grandmother who often gave mentoring advice about motherhood, Karen, then suggested a strategy for balancing both a clean house and quality time with children. In her role as a grandmother who often babysits her two grandsons, she gets them to help her fold the laundry: "We do it together … It's done quicker. And then you do something else together" (L94-96). This mentoring advice contradicted Gloria's advice that a clean house was not important as nurturing, but her suggestion gave the women hope that they too could persuade their children to help them with household chores.

After Karen's solution to the problem lightened the tone of the discussion, Darlene said that she has succeeded in persuading her children to help her with chores, but she also related it back to her original point that nurturing children is important: "if I take the time for the girls to do the sit and watch the show and do the never-ending hug and listen to them at the end of the day … they're much more willing to help me" (L99-101). This was more mentoring advice that

portrayed Darlene as accomplishing both objectives, being a nurturer and maintaining a clean house. Darlene's advice suggested that mothers who are good nurturers will have an easier time persuading their children to help them with chores. Nurturing was thus framed as a strategy for being more successful in meeting social expectations for mothers.

After that mentoring advice, Darlene then switched back to troubles talk about the stress of being a mother: "they know that sometimes mommy just gets twitchy" (L102). The group laughed, and she explained that her daughters notice her behavior when she feels stress ("Mommy, you're twitchy" L104) and then help her with chores. Darlene then redirected the topic back to religion, a serious topic, by returning to the importance of prayer time for Christian mothers: "it's like that with God time … that time in the secret as Beth Moore is calling it" (L105-106). We understood that "God time" and "time in the secret" meant time spent alone in prayer because Moore had coined these phrases during this series. Darlene, the group leader, wrapped up the discussion by emphasizing that this private quiet time alone was something she needed: "it's like working out … you crave it. You can't live without it … It is your lifeline and I get twitchy when I haven't taken that time" (L106-108). Once again, an affirmation of faith (that "God time" improves my quality of life) closed the topic in a lengthy group discussion. In this case, Darlene concluded that Christian mothers need private time alone to pray in order to cope with the stress of balancing social expectations for mothers.

**Patterned ways of speaking**

Group discussions such as 4a, 4b and 4c exemplify that alternating between mentoring advice, affirmations of faith and troubles talk that included indirect complaints in an interpretive, relational atmosphere was a social norm in this group. In this church classroom, it was acceptable for women to reinterpret the Bible because it was part of the WBS homework. They

were an *interpretive community* (Dorfman, 1996; Fish, 1980; Radway, 1984a, 1984b; Taylor, 1999) because they rejected or reframed the meaning of their religious text even though they were not men or clergy, and they interpreted Scripture in practical ways that were beneficial to them in their daily lives. This communicative practice gave them the *authority* to interpret, which shifted interpretive authority from their religious denominations and from men.

Only women who had communicative competence (Hymes, 1972c) and authority as a longtime member of the group talked about a controversial issue in Christianity ("submit"), so they dominated the discussion, whereas in Bielo's (2009) co-ed Bible study groups, men dominated the discussion. None of the women criticized another member's new interpretations or advice in this group of Christian wives and mothers, so their conversations were relationally responsive talk (Cunliffe, 2008). The priority in this group was not to win an argument; it was a supportive atmosphere of emotional intimacy in a group of religious learners who bonded through shared practices and shared identity as Christian mothers and a shared worldview that it is difficult to meet social expectations for motherhood and faith. In this communicative scene, the women were doing their identity as a mother and as a Christian, so correlating the shared topics of religion, motherhood and lack of time was a social norm.

Altogether, these communicative practices "membered" the participants through their shared identity as wives and mothers who were practicing their patriarchal religion in an individualistic culture (Carey, 1989; Carbaugh, 1996; Molina-Markham, 2012; Philipsen, 1989; Witteborn & Sprain, 2009). Discussing the homework and videos thus created opportunities for local interpretation that have universal appeal for WBS participants because Christian women enjoy the newfound freedom and power of intellectual authority that has practical value in their lives. Local interpretation in this religious group was therefore *practical theology* in an

interpretive community that: (a) was prompted by the WBS homework as the women answered thought-provoking questions in the workbook; (b) was dominated by the members of the group who had the most authority; and (c) was appealing for women who have been oppressed by a patriarchal religion because it gave them interpretive authority regarding the application of religious doctrine in their daily lives in a social support group where women could speak freely without fear of being criticized by men.

In addition, this analysis also identified three patterns of talk that were typical in their group discussions: (a) discussions about religion often segued into the topic of motherhood; (b) mentoring advice and affirmations of faith mitigated the tension of indirect complaints; and (c) indirect complaints by young mothers about being a mom were followed by mentoring advice from older mothers. With these patterned ways of speaking in mind, next I will analyze tensions that arose in each of the three excerpts.

**Tensions and practical theology Part I: The (non)submissive wife**

Group discussion 4a included interpretive tensions as the participants engaged in different non-literalist interpretations of "submit." Interpretation is a religious practice that has been the subject of debate in the national Christian community, and most of the women around the table were silent during this group discussion. Contradictory interpretations and silence showed the tension between literalist and non-literalist Christians. In addition, the only women who spoke about this controversial issue were women who had authority in the group either due to their status as group leader (Darlene), church administrator (Joy) , or as a longtime member of the group (Karen and Melanie). The longtime members of the group had the *communicative competence* to know what could and could not be said in this church classroom, but the newcomers and younger women did not.

The discussion about "submit" also raised gender-related tensions between Christian women and men. Wifely submission has been one of the most controversial issues in Christianity throughout history (e.g., Bartkowski, 1996). Evangelical Protestants took a strong stance on the issue in their media campaign that aimed to pressure every wife to obey her husband and become a full-time nurturer in the home, and some of the women in this group had previously said that they admired James Dobson's *Focus on the Family* books which advocate the so-called nuclear family as a model for Christians (Jones, 2016). The women's responses show the tensions between men and women who practice Christianity, which have been staged in the national Christian community as a "battle for the Bible" because interpretive authority is power (Barnhart, 1993, p. 133). In reframing the meaning of wifely submission, Christian women are giving themselves power through interpretive authority in their religion, and it is practical theology because it has practical value in their daily lives.

Occupational tensions also surfaced in group discussion 5a because the group included women who do and do not work outside of the home. Despite the Evangelical Protestant media campaign, stay-at-home moms are still not regarded as highly as supermoms, mothers who work outside of the home and also fulfill social expectations for good mothers (Sasaki et al., 2010). Perhaps one of the reasons the newcomers and younger women did not talk was because of their occupational status as stay-at-home moms. Darlene declared her individual autonomy as a wife because she worked outside of the home as a professional teacher; they did not work outside of the home, so they could not declare individual autonomy for the same reason.

### Tensions and practical theology Part II: Performing the "good" mother and good Christian

Group discussion 4b about fear shows the tensions that Christian women cope with as they strive to adhere to their religious beliefs yet also be a "good" mother (Hays, 1996). Because Christians believe that the Bible is God's words (Ong, 2000), literalists believe that the Bible is the ultimate authority for how Christians should live and practice their faith. When Beth Moore said that a research study had found that the most frequent command in the Bible is "don't be afraid," her advice to women who participate in her WBS series (that they should overcome their fear in order to obey that command) was authoritative because it was based on sacred text. The electronically mediated format of these Bible studies, however, makes it easy for women to disagree with the WBS author because she is not in the classroom.

The women in the group immediately applied the speaker's advice to being a mother because motherhood was one of their shared topics due to their shared identity ("We need a little fear, just like our kids" L5). The standards for being a "good" mother are ambiguous; cultural discourses in society that pressure mothers to be "good" mothers are rooted in an outdated moral ideology which poses ambiguous expectations for today's mothers (Brown et al., 1997; Hays, 1996; Johnston & Swanson, 2006; Pedersen, 2012; Sasaki et al., 2010). "Good" is a property which cannot be defined (MacIntyre, 1981), and there are no written rules for being a "good" mother (Hays, 1996). Motherhood is thus a cultural mystique (Johnston & Swanson, 2006). Mothers who were asked to define the "good" mother cited vague clichés such as "being there" which imply that a mother should not work outside of the home and should never go anywhere without her children (Pederson, 2012, p. 236). Yet mothers cannot always be with their children and thus cannot protect them from danger. The group's reinterpretation of fear is another

example of practical theology in an interpretive community because it reflected the women's interpretive authority as they co-constructed a more realistic application of a religious belief that would be more practical in their daily lives as mothers who are raising children in a major city that has a high crime rate and other dangers.

**Tensions Part III: Redefining the "good" mother**

Group discussion 4c shows the tensions that Christian mothers experience as they strive to meet social expectations for the "good" mother (Hayes, 1996) *and* the good Christian who makes time to pray daily. Overwhelmed by the burdens of social expectations for mothers and Christians, these women co-constructed a new way to be a mother; shift the burden for chores to other family members (persuade their children to help), which enables mothers to spend more quality time with their children (be a "good" mother). In addition to quality time with children, insisting on private time alone to pray ("God time" L105) is self-nurturing that is necessary ("you can't live without it" in L107 and if you don't pray, you get so nervous that your children say you are "twitchy" L102,104,108,109). This affirmation of faith conveyed that religious practices can be a successful strategy for helping Christian mothers manage the stress of being a mom, be a better mother, and take care of the self ("it's like working out" L106). This mitigated the tensions between making time to be a mother to one's children and making time for private religious practices. Again, co-constructing a new definition had practical value and intertwined the shared topics of motherhood and religion. Correlating religion with motherhood is a form of practical theology that applies one's religious beliefs to one's daily life to gain understanding and manage tensions that result from a lack of time. In addition, Christian women have to work harder than men whenever they construct practical theology because the Bible is a patriarchal sacred text that does not include typical mothering experiences and relationships.

**Interplay of Text, Talk and Video in the Multimodal WBS Learning Process**

The electronically mediated WBS learning process, which combines *individual learning* as the women read text in the workbooks and write answers to the homework questions, *group learning* as the women watch videos, write answers and take notes in the workbook and repeat key phrases in unison, and *group discussions* about the text in the workbooks *and* the talk in the videos, is therefore a complex interplay of text, talk, and video. As the previous examples illustrate, the interplay of text, talk and video in the WBS learning process creates opportunities for *interpretative conflict* and *reframing*. Each group discussion was an opportunity for interpretive conflict because the women could disagree with a statement that the WBS author wrote in the workbook or said in a video. Disagreements in this speech situation were *oral performances in a communicative scene* that reframed the interpretation in terms of a different meaning. This reframing was meaning-making in local interpretation that co-constructed *knowledge as social worth* in the group. Interpretive conflict and reframing were valued in this group of learners because these practices align with their goal as Christians to never stop learning and interpreting the Bible in order to progress on their spiritual path and be respected in their community.

The contemporary multimodal WBS learning process "members" the participants through shared practices, shared identity, and a shared worldview. Learning the social norms for the group, how to give oral performances in this communicative scene, socializes newcomers into the speech community. Longtime members demonstrate *communicative competence* in these oral performances by engaging in the three most common types of talk: (a) indirect complaints; (b) mentoring advice; and (c) affirmations of faith. Common aspects of their identity bond the participants through their shared religious beliefs as Christians and their social roles as women

who are wives and mothers and/or grandmothers. Through shared practices, they present shared identity and co-construct a shared worldview that Christian beliefs and practices are an effective strategy for coping with problems and hardships in their daily lives. Perhaps most importantly, the multimodal WBS learning process nurtures their individual needs for emotional support, intellectual stimulation, and social respect *and* provides a respectable reason to insist upon private time every day to relax and pray. Voluntary participation in the WBS learning process is therefore appealing to women who have been oppressed by patriarchy in their religion and in society at large.

**Interconnected modalities**

Communicative practices in contemporary multimodal WBS are more engaging than traditional Bible studies due to nine interconnected modalities in these pre-packaged religious learning materials that transform the Word through sensorial aspects of oral, written and electronic cultures.

First, preparing for the meeting required two elements of written culture. Whenever the participants read the next chapter in the workbook and completed the five days of homework for that week, they were engaged in *visual/tactile* sensorial activities; while reading, they saw and touched the workbook and looked up verses in the Bible. The homework also required writing answers in the workbook, and writing is another type of visual/tactile activity that is an element of written culture.

Second, talk during the meetings included three types of *face-to-face audio-visual* sensorial activities that are elements of oral culture: (a) listening to others talk during group discussions is face-to-face audio-visual activity that requires hearing; (b) participating in free-flowing discussions and question-and-answer responses to the group leader's questions is face-

to-face audio-visual-vocal activity that requires speaking individually and spontaneously; and (c) reciting in unison with the group while watching the speaker in the video is face-to-face audio-visual-vocal that requires speaking from memory at the same time as everyone else in the classroom.

Third, WBS participation also included two *electronic-print-visual-tactile* sensorial elements of electronic culture, because some of the women read the Word on a smart phone or iPad instead of bringing their Bible to the meeting and some of them posted on Beth Moore's global WBS blog. Fourth, whenever the women watched a video on the DVD player during the second half of the meeting, they were engaged in two other aspects of electronic culture, electronic-audio-video-visual sensorial activity that combined seeing and hearing moving images on a screen and electronic-audio-video-visual-vocal sensorial activity that added speaking in unison in response to commands from the public speaker in the video.

In combination, these nine interconnected modalities transformed the Christian experience of studying the Word into sensorial combinations of visual, tactile, audio and vocal activities that created a sense of "reality" through sight, sound, touch and talk (Ong, 2000). Elements of oral and electronic cultures heighten the Christian experience by creating the intensity of "living within events" as they are happening (versus reading the Bible) and made the speaker in the video seem more real because "voice manifests the person at a kind of maximum" (Ong, 2000, p. 174). Shared acoustic space implies presence and the combination of seeing, hearing and talking to Beth Moore manifested her presence in the classroom (Ong, 2000). Whenever she asked us to repeat a phrase and we recited it in unison, it seemed as if we were interacting with her; *mediated interaction* made it seem as if Beth Moore was physically embodying a teacher in our classroom. That is why I and other participants felt as if we "knew"

Beth Moore, a famous author and public speaker whom we had never met in person. She reflected on this phenomenon in one of her videos when she said that she was surprised that women write and mail letters to her that include pictures of and stories about their children. "You must feel like you *know* me," she said in the video. Beth Moore shares personal stories about her children in her workbooks and videos, so women who mail letters to her that include stories about and pictures of their children are completing the *mediated emotional bond* with the author and public speaker by sharing their stories about motherhood with her.

**The Benefits of Participation in Contemporary Multimodal WBS**

As this chapter has shown, participation in an electronically-enhanced, multimodal WBS augments the traditional experience of Bible study for women in several ways that are beneficial for women. First, electronically mediated WBS are more engaging than traditional Bible studies due to the above interconnected modalities that combine the sensory elements of written, oral and electronic cultures. Second, WBS give women interpretive authority that may be lacking in their denomination due to the power struggle between men and women in the midst of The Great Emergence, the postmodern reformation of Christianity (Tickle, 2008). In the privacy of a group where interpretive talk is a social norm and woman can co-construct new meanings unrestrained by men, interpretive authority is a form of intellectual freedom. Third, WBS give participants opportunities to co-construct practical theology that manages a variety of tensions in their embodied life experiences as women in a patriarchal society and religion. Fourth, practical theology provides women with opportunities to be respected for constructing knowledge as social worth in an interpretive community. Fifth, WBS give participants opportunities to bond emotionally with the WBS authors and participants through their shared identity as Christian women, which is salient because the Bible is a patriarchal sacred text and they live in a society

where their social roles can be oppressive to women. WBS participation is therefore beneficial for women intellectually, emotionally and spiritually because the multimodal learning process gives them the interpretive authority to transform the meaning of the Word through practical theology in a support group atmosphere where shared topics and communicative practices unify the participants and create a sense of belonging in a national/global mediated interdenominational religious community.

# CHAPTER FIVE:

# CONCLUSION

This study of an electronically-enhanced mediated women's Bible study group shows that the participants were an interpretive community that co-constructed practical theology in group discussions and conversational narratives. Using ethnography of communication as method, the previous chapters analyzed the context of talk in this communicative scene, the patterned ways of speaking that were social norms, and exemplars of the patterned ways of speaking in the group such as storytelling that were indicative of communicative competence in this speech situation. In this conclusion, I present, discuss and reflect on my findings and suggest future directions for research. These findings suggest why women participate in the electronically mediated format for women's Bible studies that have become commonplace among small groups of Christian women in Protestant churches throughout the United States.

This speech community was an interpretive community that functioned as a support group, and engaging in communicative practices that required religious literacy and membership in this type of group was beneficial for the women because: (a) they co-constructed knowledge that gave them social worth; (b) they gave oral performances that avowed their identity as a member of a group of Christian women who had the authority to interpret sacred text even though they were practicing a patriarchal religion; and (c) they engaged in religious practices that provided emotional intimacy and support and a sense of belonging in a community.

**Knowledge as Social Worth**

The members of the group were very knowledgeable about the topics that were discussed. Most of the women had read all or most of the Bible, and often during group discussions, they recited relevant Bible verses that they had memorized and even cited the source, the name of the book in the Bible and the numbers of the chapter and verse within that book (e.g., "And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love" 1 Corinthians: 13: 13"). In a group of Christians, these recitations from memory increased social worth because they garnered admiration and respect from others; the speaker was valued as a knowledgeable member of the group who was contributing to the discussion in beneficial ways.

In addition, the women cited other texts or media that were relevant to the topic under discussion, including the names of Christian books, movies, and videos that I had never heard of but other women in the group had read or seen. While we were studying Beth Moore's "Esther" WBS, for example, one of the women talked about a Christian movie, "One Night with the King," that portrays the dramatic biblical story of Esther, a Jewish orphan who became queen of Persia and saved the Jewish people from genocide by risking her own life. By broadening the scope of the resources that were being used for interpretation or application of religious concepts, these women were demonstrating previous knowledge of beliefs and practices and how they have been framed in Christian media. Education is highly valued in middle-class culture and among Protestants (Bielo, 2009; Dixon, Jones & Lowery, 1992; Radway, 1984a), so bringing other resources into the discussion was an activity that was admired and respected.

Traditional Bible studies include recitations and references to relevant media, but electronically mediated WBS also provide women with opportunities for religious interpretation. Mainstream Protestants are non-literalists who believe that anyone who studies the Bible in-

depth can interpret it, yet men have criticized women for doing so because Christianity has historically been a patriarchal religion (Barnhart, 1993; Dixon et al., 1992). Electronically mediated WBS provide a private environment where Christian women can interpret their sacred text without fear of being criticized by Christian men. In this support group atmosphere, women who interpreted the Bible gave themselves the authority of interpretation. The women who had been longtime members of this group were the most outspoken regarding constructing new religious interpretations, as opposed to the newcomers, who generally watched, listened, and asked questions. Whenever the longtime "regulars" collectively discussed and agreed upon a new interpretation of a Bible verse or religious concept, they demonstrated the power to generate new knowledge that was valued as progressive in this religious learning environment (Bielo, 2009). Generating new knowledge through interpretation enhanced the images of the speakers and motivated newcomers to study the Bible and continue attending these meetings so they could experience the same advanced level of understanding and autonomy in this speech community.

The longtime members also were knowledgeable about the implicit social norms which had been established in this specific group and demonstrated their knowledge by giving oral performances that conformed to those rules. For example, the older women often gave advice to the younger women about being a mom. This type of mentoring was admired and respected in the group because they were helping other women become better mothers, and motherhood is a value in the church and in society. Simply stated, the longer you had been in the group, the more you knew regarding what to expect and do in this women's Bible study. After being in the group for a year, I felt this comfort level and noticed that knowledge of social norms and communicative practices in this small religious group was respected and admired. My communicative competence (Hymes, 1972c) was validated when the group leader asked me to

substitute for her during an upcoming meeting because she was going to be on a mission trip in South Africa. In hindsight, one could argue that I was asked to be a substitute group leader because of my university teaching experience; however, the group leader would not have asked me to fill in for her if I did not have in-depth knowledge of the group's meeting structure, communicative practices and social norms.

Engaging in religious literacy as a member of this group thus increased one's social worth in this community by giving each woman opportunities to: (a) recite Scripture from memory; (b) cite relevant Christian media; (c) generate new interpretations of sacred text; and (d) follow the group's implicit rules for talk by giving oral performances that would be admired and respected in this communicative scene.

**Oral Performances in a Communicative Scene**

In group discussions and in conversational narratives, the women gave oral performances that performed their identity as members of this group. These oral performances connected their personal experiences and knowledge to their shared beliefs, and practical theology constructed a shared worldview as an interpretive community. Many of the group's oral performances included the three most prevalent topics during the meetings: (a) religion, as they discussed their beliefs and practices; (b) lack of time, as they sought to find a balance between fulfilling social responsibilities and taking care of self and others; and (c) the ideology of motherhood, as they navigated how to be a good Christian "mom" in today's world.

This talk was salient because oral performances in a small religious group that link personal experience to Scripture "make God's word come alive" in group communication (Searl, 1994, p. 115). Telling a story and/or asserting one's strong faith in God is highly valued in small religious groups because the speaker is mentoring and inspiring others in the group through

personal testimony. Whenever the women in the Bible study group shared their personal experiences and interpreted them through the lens of Christian beliefs, they demonstrated that they understood the social norms for this group and gained acceptance by following the social norms for this group. Additionally, when their experiences were common to other members of this group, such as feeling stress due to social expectations for Christians/women/mothers/ grandmothers/daughters of elderly parents, their oral performance was an indirect complaint that bonded women through camaraderie (Boxer, 1993). Many of the group discussions and conversational narratives about personal experiences in this group included the three most prevalent topics (religion, motherhood and lack of time) and were indirect complaints that framed religious beliefs and practices as a solution to a problem that related to meeting social expectations. In doing so, these oral performances set a precedent through group mentoring because one or more of the other women gave advice that connected their personal experience to moral values or Biblical truth.

Therefore, oral performances in the women's Bible study gave the women opportunities to "do" their identity in the group by engaging in its patterned ways of speaking, which focused on the three most common topics (religion, motherhood, and lack of time) using the three most common types of talk (mentoring advice, assertions of faith, and troubles talk that included indirect complaints). Discussing problems in their daily lives through the lens of their religion gave the participants a forum for interpreting new meaning and created a shared worldview in this group, because speaking on behalf of knowledge or experience framed the problem or issue as normative, tolerable, and solvable through Christian beliefs and practices. The shared worldview that Christian beliefs and practices are an effective strategy for coping with problems in daily life functioned as a "filter" through which this interpretive community organized their

experiences in social interaction that included group discussions and conversational narratives (Fish, 1980, 1989).

**Conversational Narratives in a WBS Support Group**

Co-constructed conversational narratives were a social norm in the group that also included the three most common topics (religion, motherhood and lack of time) and used the three most common types of talk (mentoring advice, assertions of faith, and troubles talk that included indirect complaints). Storytelling occurred in one of two patterns; either one woman told a story and the group responded to it, or it was a story chain of narratives that were all in the same theme and included references to stories that had already been told. In both patterns, one story led to another story, and as each woman told a story, the group responded in ways that helped reframe the meaning of the story. Even though the format for electronically mediated WBS was highly structured, it allowed space for women to share their personal experiences.

Storytelling in the group could be in a humorous or serious tone, depending on the topic and how it was framed. When the story was poignant, some of the women wiped tears from their eyes, so it was very dramatic. After a woman told a deeply personal story during the meeting, it was not uncommon for another woman to walk over and hug her before leaving that day. The group's emotionally supportive responses therefore encouraged storytelling about deeply personal problems because kindness was the social norm for responding to such narratives. Crying was perfectly acceptable, and some of the women talked about how they cried while reading poignant narratives in the workbook readings. For example, WBS author Kay Arthur told a narrative in her "Lord, Teach Me to Pray" workbook about a large family in Siberia that had no food on Christmas Eve. The situation was heartbreaking and the end of the story was heartwarming, because it was an example of answered prayer when a stranger delivered bread to

their front door in a blizzard. When we discussed that story during the meeting, Denise said, "I read it twice so I could cry twice." Denise *wanted* to cry again. Reading stories in the workbook also encouraged the women to tell their own heartbreaking and heartwarming stories in the group. The interplay of text, talk and video therefore stimulated this communicative practice; because storytelling was a norm in the WBS workbooks and videos, reading stories in the workbooks and watching the speakers in the videos tell stories led to telling similar stories in group interaction that created emotional intimacy and perpetuated this social norm in the group.

As the women told and responded to narratives, they were giving oral performances that co-constructed knowledge as social worth. Reframing troubles talk was a valuable communicative practice in the group because it provided information that enhanced their images as mothers and Christians. For example, Anne's "Mommy Brain" story that reframed troubles talk (criticism from her husband that there was something wrong with her brain) by normalizing it as a common problem for mothers (information overload from multi-tasking and managing the family schedules and household) reconstructed her image as a good mother even though she had a memory problem. The group's responses to the three women who told their secret stories about fertility treatments, artificial insemination and adoption after they had failed to naturally conceive children were co-constructed practical theology that enhanced the images of those women as mothers and Christians by reframing adoption and these medical procedures as "God's plan" for their lives. Furthermore, whenever the women gave mentoring advice, they enhanced their images as mothers and/or Christians by framing themselves as an expert and generated new knowledge that was valued by the other women in the group because their lives were similar due to shared aspects of identity.

Therefore, conversational narratives in this group interaction created emotional intimacy that "membered" the participants through practical theology, shared identity, shared topics and shared religious beliefs and practices (Braunstein, 2012; Carbaugh, 1996; Carey, 1989; Lampert & Ervin-Tripp, 2006; Molina-Markham, 2012; Todd, 2013; Witteborn & Sprain, 2009).

**Interpretive Authority as Women-Centered Practical Theology**

The format for electronically mediated WBS stimulated and provided opportunities for the local interpretations that occurred in the group. Whenever the women discussed the homework in the workbooks and the speaker's oral performances in the videos, these multimodal learning materials prompted interpretive conflict and reframing in group discussions. Participation in an electronically-enhanced mediated WBS significantly alters or changes the traditional Bible study experience for Christian women by giving them interpretive authority in a religious community where historically men have had such authority. The WBS learning process gave them opportunities to negotiate interpretive conflict and reframe dominant understandings in group discussions about the texts and videos. I call this type of practical theology *women-centered practical theology*, and it is beneficial for women whose voices have been silenced by patriarchy. Instead of simply listening to men interpret their sacred text, women actively presented their ideas, and their ideas were not contested. Regardless of whether their interpretations were traditional or liberal, it was acceptable to share new ideas and disagree in this safe space because it was relational talk. Group consensus was not necessary because everyone in the group was learning in an emotionally supportive atmosphere, and that was the primary concern. Women-centered practical theology therefore gave the participants intellectual autonomy in an interpretive community where they could co-construct knowledge that gave them social worth.

Through religious practices that included women-centered practical theology, each woman in the group had the power to nurture herself instead of focusing solely on others in an effort to meet social expectations for the selfless mother ideology (Hays, 1996). In a patriarchal marriage and society, WBS participation enabled the Christian wife and mother to say "leave me alone, I'm busy" to her family and still be respected for learning new information in the frames of faith and education. She nurtured herself by carving out private time to prepare for the weekly meetings (five days of readings and homework) and by adding her WBS meeting to the family schedule so she could enjoy the rewards of socialization in a support group atmosphere. She nurtured her intellect by learning about her religion and interpreting her religious text and daily life in oral performances during the meetings. In addition, as in Beth Moore's WBS in Houston, the meetings in this group were often a "girls' night out" atmosphere that was fun, created emotional bonds and camaraderie, and included group mentoring that aimed to help other women become a better mom or Christian.

Reading the workbooks and Bible daily, as required in the WBS format, therefore gave Christian women the power to withdraw temporarily (an escape from monotony and oppression) from patriarchal social roles that require a wife and mother to always "be there" to care for her family and gave them the autonomy to nurture the self (time to read alone at home and interpret religious text and bond with other women in a fun support group atmosphere that included entertaining videos) in the frame of social values (faith, education and family). Prior studies have suggested that nurturing the self can fulfill unmet needs such as a lack of power (Rucker & Galinsky, 2008) and a lack of self-worth and social status (Jaiswal & Gupta, 2015) in one's life. Communicative practices in electronically mediated WBS that give women interpretive authority through women-centered practical theology may help compensate for women's lack of power

and status in their social roles as nurturers and mitigate the anxiety that Protestants feel about their place in a post-modern society where they are no longer the moral majority due to cultural influences (Jones, 2016).

Overall, participation in an electronically mediated WBS was beneficial for the women because these shared practices provided the women with: (a) the intellectual autonomy to create women-centered practical theology; (b) emotional support in a group of Christian women who told personal stories; (c) two hours of weekly social interaction with peers; (d) peer respect for shared religious practices and the co-construction of knowledge; and (e) private time every day to relax, read and pray. Making time for these shared practices gave the participants a respite from their social roles as wives and mothers in a patriarchal religion, culture, and society.

## Discussion and Implications of Findings

The findings of this study contribute to literature in six areas of study: (a) interpretive communities; (b) women in religion; (c) transformations of the Word; (d) women's communication in the small group setting; (e) storytelling practices in groups; and (f) ethnography of communication.

### Interpretive communities

The readers in my study actively interpreted meaning from texts, and the women interpreted text and talk in terms of meaning that differed from traditional interpretations. For example, some of the women proposed alternative interpretations of "submit" in Ephesians 5:22-24, viewing it as a partnership with one's husband rather than the traditional interpretation that submission in Christian marriage is wifely obedience, and the group disagreed with WBS author Beth Moore when she said in one of her videos that women should overcome all of their fears. Additionally, whenever the women extracted similar meaning from a text, it was due to their

shared beliefs and "a set of in-force assumptions" (Fish, 1980, p. 357). Religious beliefs and values, as well as social norms for being a good mother, were assumptions that guided their interpretations. In these ways, my findings support Fish's (1980) initial concept of the interpretive community as a group of individuals who share the same frame of interpretation due to socialization and common beliefs and experiences.

My findings also support Radway's (1984a) extension of the interpretive community to popular literature because the women in the Bible study interpreted their popular texts differently than the author intended and the practice of reading provided emotional gratification and private time that functioned as a respite from their patriarchal social roles. Likewise, the women in the Bible study were similar to readers Dorfman's (1996) study of interpretive communities that analyzed short story interpretations because readers in both studies extracted meaning from texts through a "similar filter" and interpretations were based on pre-existing assumptions regarding how the text should be read (p. 456).

Those three studies, however, did not include social interaction in a group of readers as they interpreted the meaning of text. The participants in the women's Bible study were like members of a book club, because they read the same text and then met face-to-face to discuss it. Therefore, my study extends the literature on interpretive communities by showing how interpretations of text can be co-constructed in a group through a similar filter based on pre-existing assumptions regarding how the text should be read. In this group, it was acceptable to disagree with the WBS author while reading about concepts such as wifely submission and overcoming all fear because those concepts did not have practical application in one's daily life. The group's face-to-face discussions and conversational narratives showed how women-centered practical theology gave women the interpretive authority to navigate controversial waters amidst

religious tensions between Evangelical and Mainline Protestants and gender-oriented tensions between Christian men and women.

**Women in religion**

Women-centered practical theology includes individual and collective reinterpretation of Scripture that is characteristic of The Great Emergence, the postmodern reformation of Christianity (Tickle, 2008). The electronically mediated WBS movement is therefore contributing women's perspectives on religion to the literary deconstruction of Scripture that is occurring in U.S. Protestant churches. In postmodern times, "all writing – be it sacred or secular – has no innate meaning until it is read and, therefore, has no meaning outside of the circumstances and disposition of the reader" (Tickle, 2008, p. 79). Interpretive authority is giving women the individual autonomy to find religious meaning in their embodied life experiences and recognize their importance in society, particularly what it means to be a mother in today's world.

This localized interpretive authority is also giving women the collective autonomy to participate as intellectuals in their religious communities. They can engage in the ongoing conversation regarding Christian beliefs in face-to-face communication in their local groups and in mediated communication on Christian blogs where literalists and non-literalists are debating theological rights and interpretive differences. This is salient because previously women in general have been valued for their service as volunteers in churches rather than as intellectuals. In the church that I attended years ago, for example, a woman was valued if she brought homemade food to the church's potluck dinner, volunteered to work in the church nursery during the Sunday service, and/or helped organize a fundraising event for the church. In that church's co-ed Bible study groups, women listened as men interpreted Scripture. The electronically

mediated WBS movement thus created a new paradigm for women to engage in religious conversations regarding theology rather than simply being present and/or volunteering their cooking, babysitting or clerical services to the church.

In addition, the WBS movement has created a sisterhood. Like the global women's marches that emerged during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, Beth Moore's electronically mediated WBS have created a sense of belonging in a national and global movement that is woman-oriented. This sisterhood is interdenominational, so any Christian women can join by simply attending a women's Bible study in a Protestant church or starting a small group in her home. During my fieldwork, I felt a sense of membership in this sisterhood because: (a) I was a full participant in the local group; (b) I saw Beth Moore interact with women in her studio audiences in the videos; (c) I participated in the global blog for women; and (d) in my workplace and in public settings, I talked to women who said they were participating in or had participated in Beth Moore's electronically mediated WBS in small groups. Seeing and communicating with other members of this sisterhood gave me a sense of unity with them regardless of their Christian denomination, age, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and/or geographic location. For many of the Christian women who participate in electronically mediated WBS, the feeling of religious community has likely expanded from membership in a local denomination to membership in a widespread egalitarian women-centered movement in which they can be full participants socially and intellectually.

**Transformations of the Word**

Because the ongoing religious conversation in face-to-face and mediated communication among Christians is widespread, the postmodern reformation of Christianity is being influenced by multiple denominations (Tickle, 2008). There is "a new way of being Christian" that is

relational, non-hierarchal and democratic (Tickle, 2008, p. p. 153). As my study has shown, the Word is being transformed in relational face-to-face talk in interdenominational WBS groups. Denominations are less important in these groups because the format is open-minded group discussion of individual interpretations of the Word and the goal is to compare rather than debate or reach a consensus. For example, in the group that I studied, one of the women was a practicing Catholic who periodically told the group the Catholic perspective on the topic that was under discussion. One year right before Christmas, she even gave us copies of a special Catholic prayer that had been distributed in her church. The sharing of different religious beliefs was valued in this WBS group because we were "interpreting the Word of God to *ourselves*" (Ong, 2000, p. 320, italics in original). Local interpretive authority in these groups is democratic in that it bypasses the gatekeepers within specific denominations who previously dominated interpretation. The Word is being transformed by laypersons and women for relational and individual purposes rather than by clergy for organizational purposes.

Christians in the online community are criticizing Beth Moore and one another for transforming the meaning of the Word, but the interpretive cherry-picking that is occurring in the electronic age has been common among all denominations as various religious leaders decided which Bible verses to accept and reject. Even literalists are interpreting the Word by deciding not to change its meaning from the traditional perspective. Reading the Bible is thus an interpretive act, and smart phones and iPads have changed our relationship to this sacred text because instead of holding a thick, heavy book, we can read it online, either by using a search engine to find a specific verse or by downloading the entire text. Personally, I still prefer to read the book because reading the Word on my phone feels more academic than religious, but

Darlene, Joy and other women in the WBS group used their smart phones and iPads to look up verses during our group discussions.

In the electronic age, mediated WBS videos that include writing, sight and sound transform the Word by heightening the intensity of the Bible study experience. The homework requires the reader to write her interpretations of select verses in the workbooks, so the learner is interacting with the text and can interpret the Word through her embodied lived experience. The videos feature Beth Moore and other Christian women authors speaking the Word, and the women in their studio audiences and in small groups interact with the video by repeating verses during the recitations ritual. The Word as sound occurs in the present, so hearing it is very different from reading a historical book, and spoken words are powerful because they are actively produced (Ong, 2000). Hearing the Word spoken in a video in a group therefore transforms Scripture into an "event" that includes sight and sound (Ong, 2000, p. 112). As explained in Chapter 4, Beth Moore's format for WBS transforms studying the Word into a sensorial rich experience that includes nine interconnected modalities in face-to-face and electronically mediated communication. Elements of oral culture, written culture and the electronic age therefore stimulate interpretation of the Word in the local group.

**Women's communication in the small group setting**

Oral performances in the group that I studied show that the women engaged in troubles talk about problems in their everyday lives (Tannen, 1990), and this troubles talk often took the form of indirect complaints (Boxer, 1993). As in Guendozi's (2005) study of social interaction among mothers, the women in the Bible study complained about social expectations for mothers and a lack of time, and the process of complaining bonded the women emotionally and enhanced their social identity and moral worth by performing identity according to social norms. Many of

these complaints occurred as the women told personal stories to the group (Lampert & Ervin-Tripp, 2006) that constructed their social identity; they were striving to be a "good" mother (Hays, 1996), or in the case of mothers whom also work outside of the home, a "supermom" ("Sasaki et al., 2010; Thurer, 1994; Uttal, 1996).

This study contributes to literature about talk in groups of women by showing how they can engage in religious practices as a strategy for coping with social expectations for mothers. In contrast to the "selfless" mother (Arendall, 2000; Hays, 1996; Held, 1993; Liamputton, 2006; Tong, 1997; Weingarten, 1997), the women in the Bible study reserved time in their busy schedules every day to read, pray, and answer thought-provoking questions in the homework assignments that gave them opportunities for personal reflection and interpretation. These literary and religious practices were beneficial because they nurtured the self (and thus nurtured the family nurturer), and gave the participants private time to take a daily break from their roles as cooks, food servers, housekeepers, counselors, and social directors. Women can therefore use literary and religious practices to nurture themselves with emotional gratification, intellectual stimulation and autonomy.

The women in my study did not passively agree with everything that the authors had written and said in the videos; they thought critically about what they read and heard. This study shows that women in Bible study groups can think critically about their religious text, which contradicts the findings of Bielo's (2009) ethnography of Bible study groups. It is important to note that the groups Bielo studied were not electronically mediated, so the groups of men in his study who debated interpretations of Scripture and the groups of women who told personal stories but did not interpret Scripture were meeting in a different context than the multimodal learners in my study. The format for electronically mediated WBS that Beth Moore established

which challenges women to think and interpret Scripture in terms of their own lives may be a factor in the difference between the findings of these studies.

The group discussions and conversational narratives about motherhood in this study also show that today's electronically mediated Bible studies for women accentuate the learning experience for women who are mothers. Beth Moore and other WBS authors set the precedent for storytelling by telling stories about their children in the workbooks and videos, and the women in the group shared their motherhood experiences as they discussed their religious beliefs and practices. These oral performances were salient because the Bible is a patriarchal text that excludes, marginalizes and undervalues women, and women have experienced gender discrimination in churches (Holmes & Farley, 2011; Johnson, 1993; Monk Kidd, 1992; Rayburn & Comas-Diaz, 2008; Ruether, 1983). Participation in electronically mediated WBS therefore gave recognition to Christian mothers in the group because the workbooks and videos emphasized their importance in society and the meetings provided the women with opportunities to bond emotionally through troubles talk about motherhood and share mentoring advice about motherhood in a social support group atmosphere.

My findings confirm the relational purposes of communication practices in small religious groups across America that function as support groups (Rynsburger & Lamport, 2008). The women in my study said that participating in a small group fills a void in their lives that Sunday morning church services do not, because being in a small group gives them a sense of belonging in a community (Dougherty & Whitehead, 2011). The group dynamics in WBS meetings encouraged the participants to talk and share their feelings, often while telling personal stories (Bielo, 2009; Day, 2005; Lawson, 2006; Searl, 1994; Wuthnow, 1994a, 1994b). Storytelling as a communicative practice was analyzed in detail because as in other U.S. small

groups, storytelling bonded the women emotionally and unified the participants (Wuthnow, 1994a).

These findings also support previous studies of practical theology in small groups. Like Todd's (2013) study of a women's Bible study in the United Kingdom, the women in the group that I studied applied religious concepts to real life experience in order to gain new insight into their religious beliefs. This enabled the participants to interpret their religious text "through the lens of everyday life" (Searl, 1994, p. 123). Through storytelling about how they live their religion, the women experienced the reality of their shared beliefs and practices (McGuire, 2008). As in Wuthnow's (1994a) comprehensive study of small groups in the United States, the women co-constructed new knowledge while discussing their personal views.

In addition to supporting previous studies, my study has contributed to literature on small religious groups in several ways. First, the group that I studied was interdenominational, as opposed to a homogeneous group of religious learners who are members of the same church. Most of the women in this group were members of the United Methodist church where we met every week, but one of the longtime members was Catholic and attended a Catholic church, and other members did not attend any church services. Compared with traditional Bible studies that are held in a church, denominations are less important in today's electronically mediated WBS because the authors create them for interdenominational groups of women. The interdenominational WBS learning materials and the religious diversity of the group members provided opportunities for talking about a variety of religious beliefs and practices, including Catholic, Jewish, and Muslim. In this ecumenical atmosphere, the women compared Christianity to other religions, and all other religious beliefs were discussed with respect.

Second, this is one of the first known studies of a small religious group that used the electronically mediated WBS format, so I was able to study the interplay of text, talk and video in this communicative scene. To my knowledge, no other scholar has studied Beth Moore's popular format for small religious learners, which makes this research study groundbreaking because I was able to compare the differences between the old format for Bible studies (taking turns reading verses from the Bible and discussing them in a group) and the new format for mediated Bible studies for women (talking about entertaining texts and videos that interpret the Bible in new ways). The new format stimulates critical thinking about religious text in written homework and group discussions that lead to new interpretations of meaning. Speaking the Word in a group and hearing others recite Bible verses helps religious learners interpret meaning and gain deeper understanding from a book that was written centuries ago (Ong, 2000). Multimodality and critical thinking made the group meeting a "space of ongoing configuration" of meanings (ledema, 2007, p. 940).

Third, because the participants of the group that I studied co-constructed new meanings, I was able to study a small religious group that functioned as an interpretive community. That is a contribution to communication and religious studies because it shows critical thinking through reframing. Most small religious groups that have been studied simply engaged in prayer as a group (Day, 2005; Griffith, 1997; Westfield, 2001) or discussed religious text and applied it to their lives (Bielo, 2009; Day, 2005; Lawson, 2006; Rynsburger & Lamport, 2008; Searl, 1994; Wuthnow, 1994a, 1994b). Prompted by the electronically mediated format of WBS, the women's Bible study reinterpreted their sacred text in new ways that unified the group.

**Storytelling practices in groups**

Telling personal stories was a routine practice in the group, and as with Radway's (1984)

readers of popular literature, interpretation was influenced by expectations for storytelling norms that had developed over time in a community. Similar to scholars who studied groups of local journalists as interpretive communities, I found that the participants in my study constructed stories through shared frames for interpretation based on stories they had read (Berkowitz & TerKeurst, 1999; Robinson & DeShano, 2011; Zelizer, 1993). Like Zelizer's (1993) study of how journalists collectively covered McCarthyism and the Watergate scandal, this study highlights the power of narratives as interpretation that produce "certain constructions of reality" and "certain kinds of narratives" (p. 223). Again and again, the women in the Bible study group interpreted past events by constructing realities that used narratives to reframe troubles talk as assertions of faith.

Storytelling in the women's Bible study also co-constructed a shared worldview in the group through shared aspects of identity. Through oral performances, the women avowed their social identity, their moral evaluation of self and where they belong in their social and cultural world (Goffman, 1959). As a community, they were all Christian wives and mothers who were struggling to meet social expectations. Yet their stories also simultaneously preserved each woman's individuality within the community by shaping her identity (Wuthnow, 1994a). Additionally, telling stories that included assertions of faith helped the members accomplish their primary goal of spiritual growth, making progress on their spiritual path by learning more about their sacred text and applying it to their everyday lives (Bielo, 2009).

My findings also have significance for storytelling in other types of group communication because the women told narratives in two different patterns and the stories they told were influenced by the multimodality of the learning environment. Whenever the group leader asked an icebreaker question, the group responded with a chain of individual stories that

were in the same theme as the icebreaker question. This differed from the individual narratives that the women told during group discussions whenever the topic prompted them to remember and share a poignant memory about a heartwarming or heartbreaking personal experience. I analyzed both patterns of storytelling as conversational narratives (Ochs & Capps, 2001) because both were co-constructed and combined individual stories and group responses to those stories. Furthermore, whenever the WBS author told several narratives in the workbook readings and/or video, the group discussions included more storytelling that was similar to what they had read. Therefore, storytelling in text and video stimulated storytelling in the group, and those face-to-face oral performances encouraged more storytelling that unified the participants.

**Ethnography of communication**

As a researcher, I followed the criteria for ethnography of communication by analyzing the context of the community, the group's patterned ways of speaking, the functions of language, and appropriateness as a factor in the talk that was influenced by context and understanding in this communicative scene (Carbaugh et al., 1997; Hymes, 1972a). I also analyzed communicative competence, the ability to communicate appropriately within this group, and how that cultural knowledge was learned through socialization (Hymes, 1972c). Long-term fieldwork gave me opportunities to participate in and observe how the women co-constructed meanings in their communication practices (Hymes, 1974). To analyze the large volume of data that I collected during a 20-month period, I developed a three-step methodological approach: (a) line-by-line analysis of excerpts that were exemplars of the talk in this group; (b) analysis of the religious, cultural and gender-oriented tensions in the talk; (c) analysis of the group's patterned ways of speaking. This approach could potentially be used by other scholars to analyze long-term ethnographic data.

Although it is labor-intensive and time-consuming, I highly recommend long-term ethnography of communication as a research method because it can give the researcher insight into a group's communicative practices that may not be apparent to a stranger who joins the group on a short-term basis. When I began this research project as a pilot study, I analyzed this communicative scene as a group of women who were giving oral performances in a friendly atmosphere that was framed as a religious learning environment yet also performed their identity as a "good" mother in society. After 20 months of participant-observation and many months of analysis, however, I developed a much more in-depth and comprehensive conceptualization of the group's communicative practices.

It is important to note that other research methods would not have produced the same results as long-term ethnography of communication. A survey of the WBS participants in the group would have been a one-time extraction of self-reported culture and communication practices among longtime members *and* newcomers who had not yet learned communicative competence in this group. As a long-term participant, I was able to observe communicative competence *and* experience firsthand how socialization cultivated communicative competence. Individual interviews with participants also would have limited my findings because they would have produced narratives of self-reported culture and communicative competence that some of the members had not yet learned. Even a combination of a survey and individual interviews, as in Radway's (1984a, 1984b) study of novel readers, therefore would not have created an accurate portrait of culture, communication practices and communicative competence in this group's interaction.

Ethnography would not have shown the relationship between language and culture in the group's interaction. For example, in this community of women who were mothers, the

participants did not use the word "mother" to describe themselves; they used the word "Mom" in group discussions and conversational narratives. Whereas "mother" is a social role, "Mom" is an endearing name that children use to address their mother when they are talking to her. By using "Mom" instead of "mother" when talking about oneself in a group of mothers, the women emphasized the close emotional relationship between a mother and her child. This emphasis bonded the women emotionally through their shared identity as mothers and shaped the relational culture in the group. To understand the culture in a community, one must study how they use language and what language does in interaction (Keating, 2001; Philipsen, 1975).

My pilot study included only short-term participant-observation and a focus group interview, which together gave me an initial impression of interaction in the group. Although these methods gave me the opportunity to see oral performances in a community, the participants were not acting naturally because they did not yet know or trust me. To alleviate the observer effect, I had to become a long-term member of the group. After I had been in the group for several months, more of the women talked candidly and some of the women who previously had not volunteered their homework answers or told personal stories began contributing actively to the group interaction. Six months into my fieldwork, this higher comfort level was officially acknowledged by the group leader. Whenever we introduced ourselves on the first day of each new WBS series and I informed the newcomers that I was audio-recording their meetings for research purposes, Darlene supported my presence as a researcher by smiling and saying "She's one of us" to alleviate privacy concerns. This comment from the group leader assured newcomers that they could trust me even though I was a researcher. Additionally, the participants might not have been so candid about sharing their secrets during the "Sacred

Secrets" WBS if I had not been in the group for a year. Long-term participant-observation was therefore necessary to gain the group's trust and alleviate the observer effect.

A content analysis of WBS workbooks and videos would have been much easier, but it would not shown interaction and interpretation in the group. This method would have revealed how the WBS authors set precedents for storytelling and/or interpretation, but it would not have been a comprehensive portrait of how the text and videos shaped talk in the group. I would not have completed the homework, so I would not have known what it was like to spend four to five hours a week before each meeting reading and thinking about the topics of discussion. I would not have attended the meetings and had the opportunities to share my homework answers, tell stories, recite in unison and engage in talk that was relationally responsive (Cunliffe, 2008).

A discourse analysis of meeting transcripts would not have been feasible because I had to gain their trust before they would let me record their meetings, and in order to gain their trust, I had to join the group on a long-term basis. Furthermore, transcribing group interaction is much more difficult than transcribing an interview between two people because you have to differentiate between numerous voices, as opposed to only two voices. Even if I had somehow obtained permission to audio-record the meetings without joining the group, I would not have heard and watched each woman talk during numerous meetings, so while transcribing the meetings, I would not have known for certain which woman was talking. To be an accurate transcriptionist, I had to engage in long-term group interaction.

Therefore, none of these other research methods would have given me firsthand experience as a newcomer who was socialized into the group over time as I learned the group's communicative competence by completing the homework, contributing to group discussions and conversational narratives, sharing my own stories, watching the videos, reciting in unison, and

giving emotionally supportive responses. By being a participant-observer in the group for more than a year, I was able to gather a sizeable volume of ethnographic data and analyze the group's culture and patterned ways of speaking and see that they were engaging in practical theology to connect their personal experiences with their sacred beliefs and interpret their sacred text in practical ways (Bielo, 2009; Lawson, 2006; Molina-Markham, 2012; Searl, 1994; Todd, 2013; Wuthnow, 1994a). Long-term ethnography of communication is thus an ideal method for studying language and culture in small religious groups, and it answers Lindlof's (2002) call for long-term ethnographic studies of group interaction in religious interpretive communities.

## Researcher Reflections: Trends in Christian Communities

While conducting my fieldwork, after each meeting I reflected on what happened in the group and wrote about the group's interaction in my typed fieldnotes. After writing the first five chapters of my dissertation, however, I reflected on the research study as a whole and gained "insight via hindsight" (Freeman, 2010, p. 62). While reflecting on my findings, I had realizations that were indicative of two trends in Christian communities.

### Electronically mediated WBS as cultural resistance

WBS authors Beth Moore, Kay Arthur, Priscilla Shirer and Mary Jo Sharp talked about the detrimental effects of American culture, and the women in the group talked about their fears that their children were being adversely affected by a popular culture that conflicts with their religious values. Like many actors and celebrities in mass media, many teenage girls dress provocatively in public to garner attention and/or wear the latest fashions in clothing. Beth Moore's "Esther: It's Tough to be a Woman" series specifically addressed this fashion trend, and she told Christian women to dress conservatively and strive to be cute rather than sexy. Additionally, the women talked about how American teenagers often abandon their religious

beliefs and practices, become sexually active, and use alcohol and/or illegal drugs to gain social acceptance. These Christian mothers saw aspects of contemporary culture that promote these behaviors as real and present dangers for their children.

Participation in a mediated WBS was resistance against the negative influences of American culture, and this resistance was enacted through parental modeling. Group interaction in the meetings indicated that in addition to taking their children to church every Sunday, these mothers read the Bible and WBS workbooks at home, talked with their families about what they learned from reading the Bible and WBS workbooks, and made their families aware that they regularly attended the Bible study meetings (e.g., "It's on the family schedule"). The women also specifically talked about impressing upon their children the importance of reading books, because today's youth prefer visual and social media. In modeling Christian values and literary practices for their children, these women were counterbalancing negative influences from mass media and peer pressure from their children's friends. This vigilant promotion of religious beliefs, practices and values to keep children safe aligns with the stance in the national Christian community that Christians are engaged in a battle with the negative aspects of American culture (Jones, 2016). Therefore, women who participated in electronically mediated WBS were doing their part for the religious war effort. They were resisting the negative influences of American culture by persistently demonstrating Christian beliefs, practices and values that served as a model for their children and others in the community.

**Mediated emotional intimacy in a national and global community**

Like many charismatic performers, Beth Moore is an engaging public speaker, and as the biography on her website says, she is also a storyteller. I feel like I know this celebrity because I have read and heard so many of her heartwarming and heartbreaking stories about herself and

her family, and in telling these stories, she doesn't act like a perfect Christian; she talks candidly about her weaknesses, fears, and mistakes the same way close friends confide in one another. As she gives speeches, the camera periodically focuses on women in her auditorium audience, so you see their verbal and non-verbal reactions. Each video-recorded performance thus seemed like a live performance, as if we were an extended studio audience that transcended time and geographic boundaries. Interacting with the video in a group made our interaction seem "more real" because seeing her talk, hearing her speak the Word, and responding to her by speaking in unison created a sense of Beth Moore's presence in our classroom (Ong, 2000, p. 114).

In retrospect, I realized that Beth Moore's style of personal storytelling legitimizes the expression of emotional intimacy in groups of women who participate in WBS series. Following her examples, the women in the group told their personal stories, and storytelling and supportive group responses co-constructed emotional intimacy. Bielo (2009) found the emotional intimacy in storytelling trend in women-only Bible studies that were not mediated, and storytelling is a norm in support groups and small religious groups (Braunstein, 2012; Day, 2005; Lawson, 2006; Molina-Markham, 2012; Searl, 1994; Todd, 2013; Wuthnow, 1994a, 1994b). The standard storytelling practice promotes emotional intimacy in groups, but the additional mediated aspect of learning in WBS groups extends emotional intimacy in groups to feelings of closeness with the authors of the learning materials and expands the feeling of community to a national level when the participants realize that numerous women in small groups across America are engaged in these religious practices. This research study has shown the interconnectedness of emotional intimacy in small groups and in the national religious community.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

My original plan for this research study was to conduct two years of fieldwork, but in

January 2014 after 20 months of participant-observation, I was not able to continue my fieldwork because the group dissolved. The group leader, Darlene, stepped down because her new job was very time-consuming; she was driving two hours a day to commute to her new job, and even though she had Thursdays off, she was working all day on Wednesdays, and part of her job was to lead a Wednesday night women's Bible study for her new Christian employer. As a result, she did not arrive home on Wednesday evenings until 10 p.m., so she no longer had enough time to prepare for our Thursday morning meetings. She announced her resignation during the last meeting of the fall 2013 semester and asked if another woman would take over as group leader, but no one volunteered. Despite two emails from the church, no one stepped up to be group leader during December or January, so the church discontinued the Thursday 10:00 a.m. small group. The other women probably joined another small group for women at the church because there were several other women-only groups and that option would have been much easier than taking on the responsibilities of leading our group. Nonetheless, as an ethnographer I felt like I had reached the point of saturation, the time when I had been in the group for so long that I knew what to expect and was not seeing any new data regarding the group's culture and patterned ways of speaking. Although my fieldwork was shorter than planned, it was sufficient for the goals of this research study.

The women in the group that I studied had the intellectual freedom to be an interpretive community because they were moderate Christians who believed that they could interpret their religious text loosely in new ways, but women who are conservative Christians do not have that freedom. For example, Candace Cameron Bure, a child actor known for her role on the long-running "Full House" television sitcom, wrote in her best-selling Christian book ("Balancing It All: My Story of Juggling Priorities and Purpose") and stated during her appearance on "The

View" television talk show that she literally interprets wifely submission in the Bible as obedience and she has obeyed her husband during the past 17 years (Rothman, 2014). Bure's literalist interpretation of Ephesians 5:22-24 reflects the conservative argument in a controversy that has continued for centuries regarding the Apostle Paul's mandate that wives must submit to their husbands has been an issue for Christian men and women (e.g., Bartkowski, 1996). Are conservative Christian women participating in WBS by Beth Moore and other authors that challenge women to think about the meaning of their religious text? Due to the controversy over interpretation rights in the national Christian community, it would be interesting to know how many women are participating in electronically mediated WBS nationwide and whether any of the small groups include conservative literalists. As they discuss the workbooks and videos, women who are conservative could either argue for literal interpretations or resist their traditional beliefs by thinking in new ways.

Among small groups of women who are participating in electronically mediated WBS, are those groups engaging in the same patterned ways of speaking as the women in this study? Do they engage in the same types of talk about the same common topics? Do other groups include women who are not mothers, and if so, do they feel "othered" by motherhood talk and stories? Are speaking rights in those groups similar? In the group that I studied, older women dominated the discussions and mentored the younger women, so speaking rights were not solely based on longtime member status. For example, Elizabeth, the grandmother who had recently joined the group, told stories, gave mentoring advice, and actively engaged in group discussions, and her contributions were welcome because the women knew that she had raised three children in a Christian household. Is this respect for elder women a trend that is also happening in other small groups of women who are using electronically mediated WBS? Can this trend be found in

other types of small groups, such as support groups? In an American culture that values youth and devalues its aging population, this is an interesting aspect of group interaction that warrants further studies.

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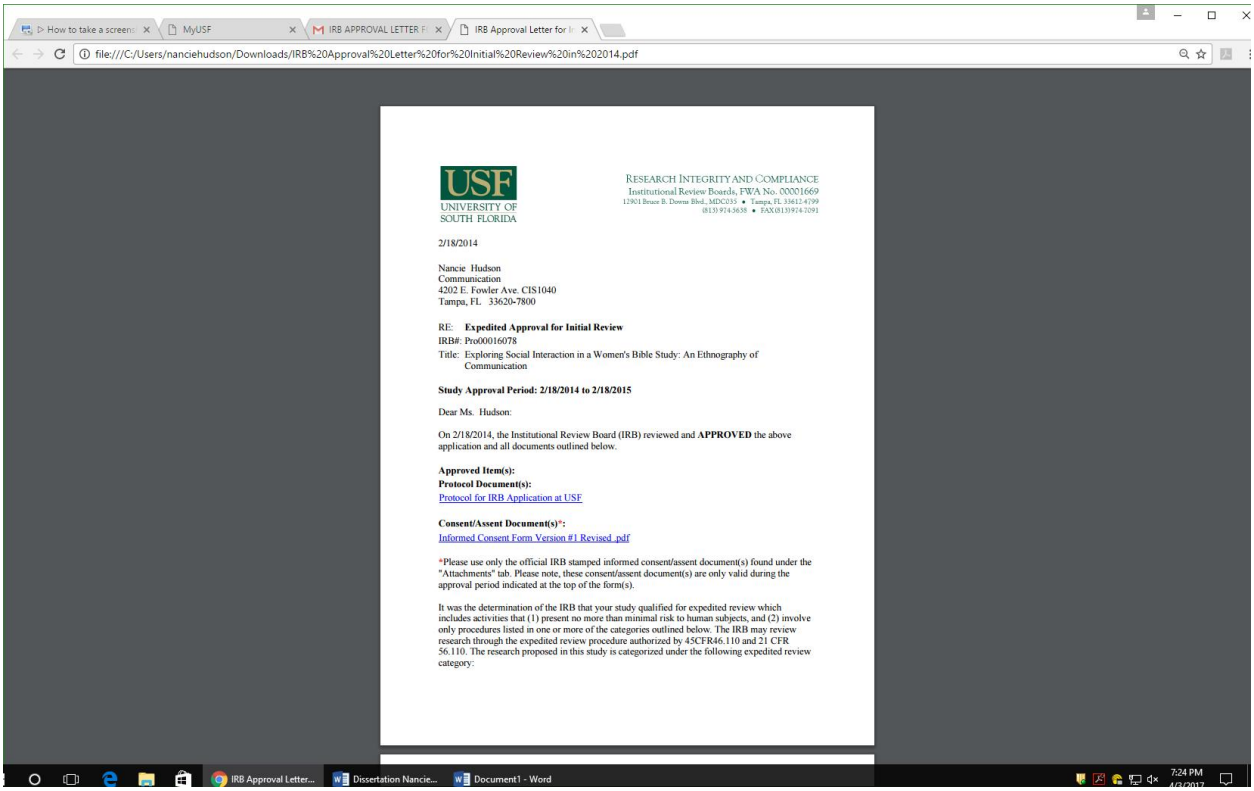
# APPENDIX A:

# IRB APPROVAL LETTERS



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SOUTH FLORIDA

RESEARCH INTEGRITY AND COMPLIANCE
Institutional Review Boards, FWA No. 00001669
12901 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., MDC035 • Tampa, FL 33612-4799
(813) 974-5638 • FAX(813)974-7091

2/18/2014

Nancie Hudson
Communication
4202 E. Fowler Ave. CIS1040
Tampa, FL 33620-7800

RE: **Expedited Approval for Initial Review**
IRB#: Pro00016078
Title: Exploring Social Interaction in a Women's Bible Study: An Ethnography of Communication

**Study Approval Period: 2/18/2014 to 2/18/2015**

Dear Ms. Hudson:

On 2/18/2014, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and **APPROVED** the above application and all documents outlined below.

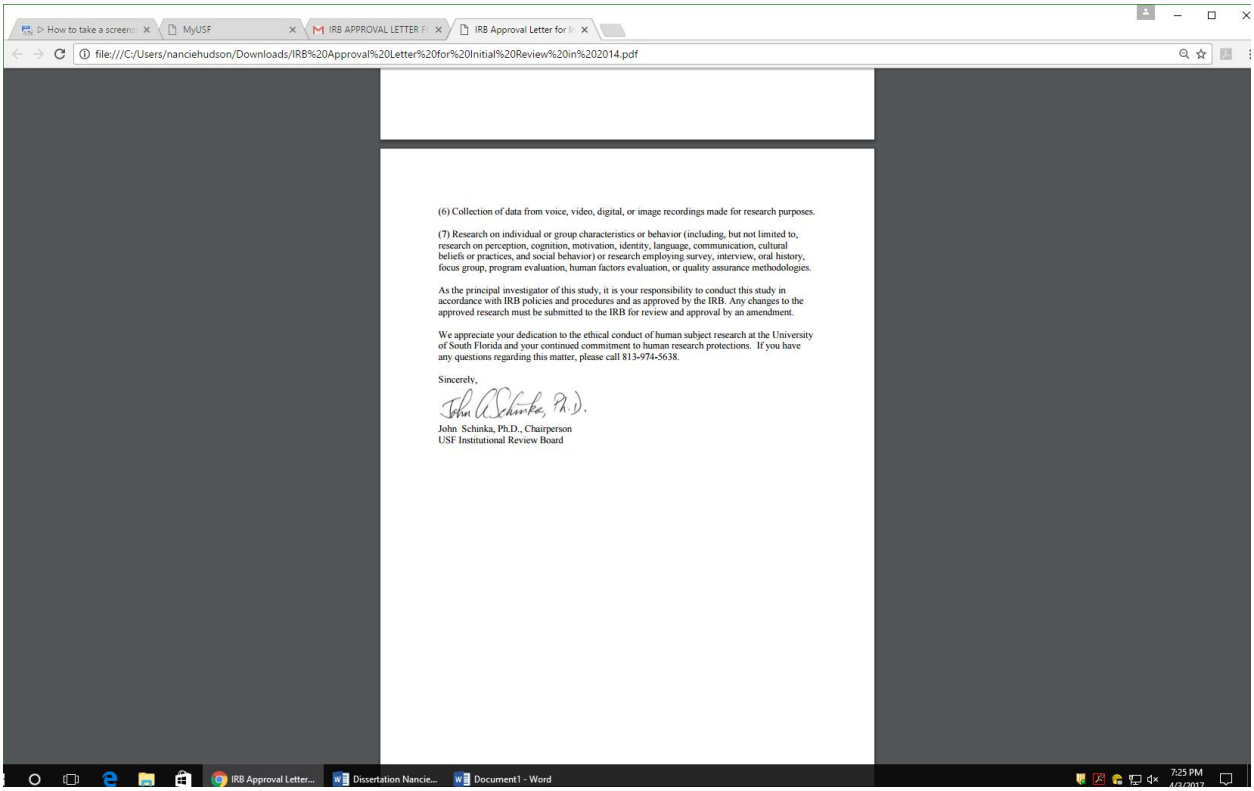
**Approved Item(s):**
**Protocol Document(s):**
Protocol for IRB Application at USF

**Consent/Assent Document(s)*:**
Informed Consent Form Version #1 Revised .pdf

*Please use only the official IRB stamped informed consent/assent document(s) found under the "Attachments" tab. Please note, these consent/assent document(s) are only valid during the approval period indicated at the top of the form(s).

It was the determination of the IRB that your study qualified for expedited review which includes activities that (1) present no more than minimal risk to human subjects, and (2) involve only procedures listed in one or more of the categories outlined below. The IRB may review research through the expedited review procedure authorized by 45CFR46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110. The research proposed in this study is categorized under the following expedited review category:





(6) Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

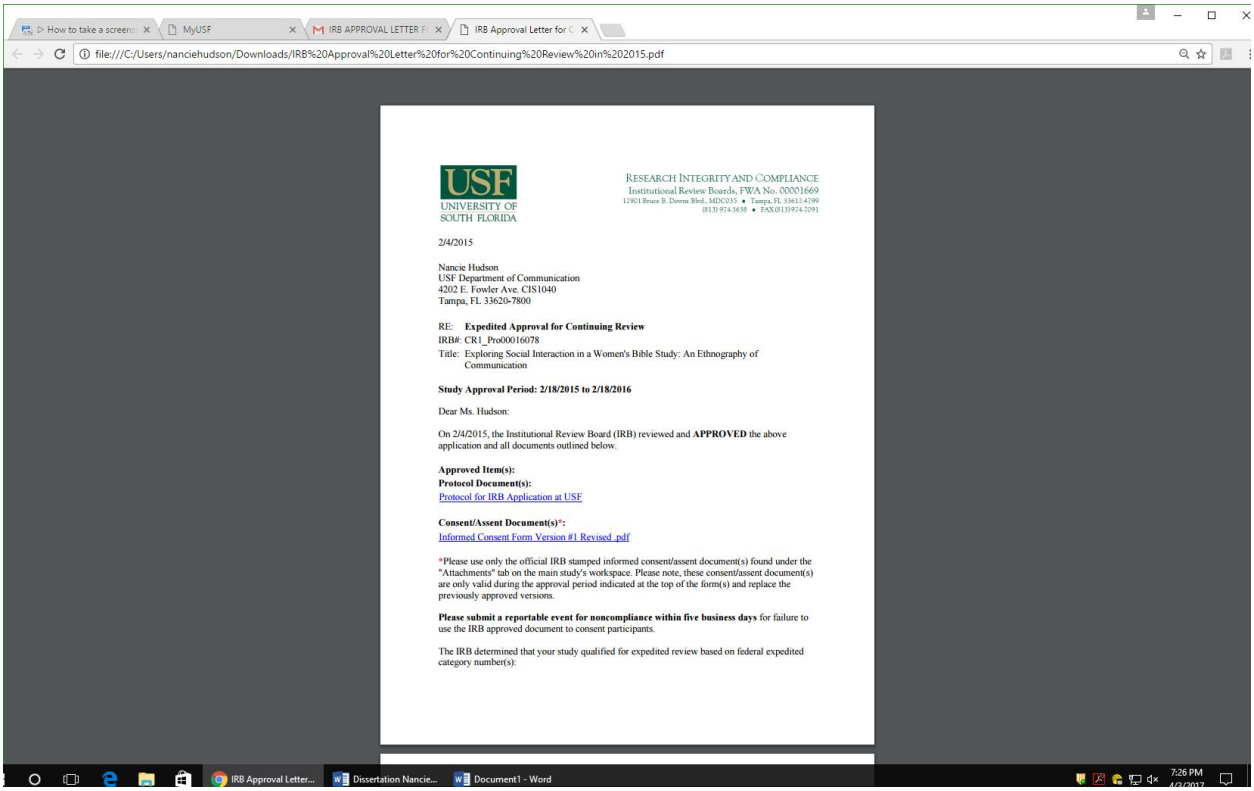
As the principal investigator of this study, it is your responsibility to conduct this study in accordance with IRB policies and procedures and as approved by the IRB. Any changes to the approved research must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval by an amendment.

We appreciate your dedication to the ethical conduct of human subject research at the University of South Florida and your continued commitment to human research protections. If you have any questions regarding this matter, please call 813-974-5638.

Sincerely,

John Schinka, Ph.D.

John Schinka, Ph.D., Chairperson
USF Institutional Review Board



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RESEARCH INTEGRITY AND COMPLIANCE
Institutional Review Boards, FWA No. 00001669
12901 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., MDC035 • Tampa, FL 33612-4799
(813) 974-5638 • FAX(813) 974-2091

2/4/2015

Nancie Hudson
USF Department of Communication
4202 E. Fowler Ave. CIS1040
Tampa, FL 33620-7800

RE: **Expedited Approval for Continuing Review**
IRB#: CR1_Pro00016078
Title: Exploring Social Interaction in a Women's Bible Study: An Ethnography of Communication

**Study Approval Period: 2/18/2015 to 2/18/2016**

Dear Ms. Hudson:

On 2/4/2015, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and **APPROVED** the above application and all documents outlined below.

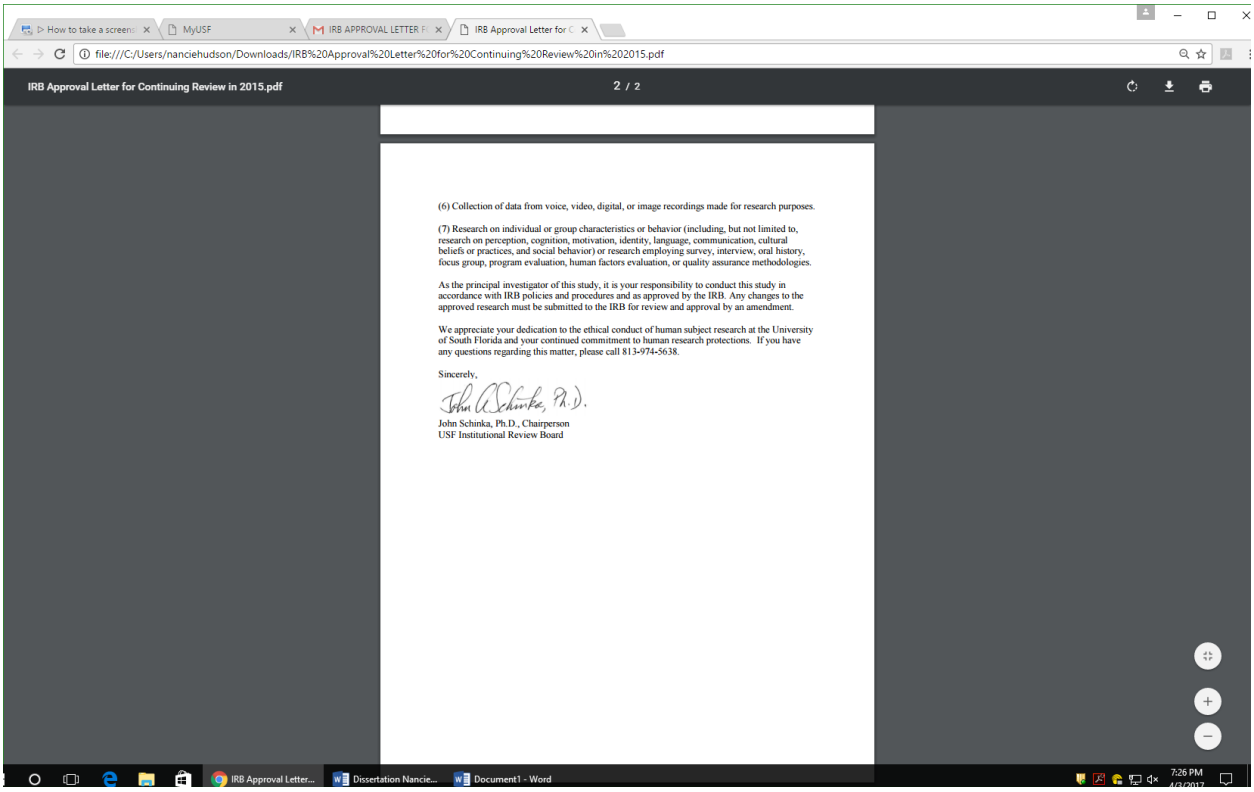
**Approved Item(s):**
**Protocol Document(s):**
Protocol for IRB Application at USF

**Consent/Assent Document(s)*:**
Informed Consent Form Version #1 Revised .pdf

*Please use only the official IRB stamped informed consent/assent document(s) found under the "Attachments" tab on the main study's workspace. Please note, these consent/assent document(s) are only valid during the approval period indicated at the top of the form(s) and replace the previously approved versions.

**Please submit a reportable event for noncompliance within five business days** for failure to use the IRB approved document to consent participants.

The IRB determined that your study qualified for expedited review based on federal expedited category number(s):



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(6) Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

As the principal investigator of this study, it is your responsibility to conduct this study in accordance with IRB policies and procedures and as approved by the IRB. Any changes to the approved research must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval by an amendment.

We appreciate your dedication to the ethical conduct of human subject research at the University of South Florida and your continued commitment to human research protections. If you have any questions regarding this matter, please call 813-974-5638.

Sincerely,

John A Schinka, Ph.D.

John Schinka, Ph.D., Chairperson
USF Institutional Review Board