

# Salvation and Social Work

## *Conversions and Charity among Pentecostal Christians in Los Angeles*

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Department of Social Anthropology

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# Abstract

This thesis is based on five and a half months of fieldwork in Los Angeles, California in 2012, and explores how a non-profit Pentecostal Christian charity organization combines social work with evangelizing. From the material I collected through spending time within a highly religious community, I identify possible explanations to why Pentecostalism is considered the fastest growing religious denomination in the world by many.

By analyzing the very different ways Pentecostals tell their own conversion narratives and the way they count other people's conversions, I suggest that the numbers of converts reported by Pentecostal organizations themselves might be questionable. Through different 'salvation strategies', my informants were highly occupied with counting as many converts as they could with every outreach event.

In addition, I found that performances of faith for my informants were regulated and adapted to their audience, and that the use of glossolalia and different forms of prayer rarely seemed arbitrary. The thesis also offers a discussion on how I as an atheist was welcomed and appreciated, but constantly encouraged to convert by my informants.

Some of the possible reasons I identify for the rapid growth of Pentecostalism include beliefs in the ability to attain spiritual gifts like tongue speak, divine healing and charismatic leadership skills. I argue that the belief in the availability of such gifts can draw converts to Pentecostalism. As can the affiliation with prosperity theology; seeking wealth was encouraged by my informants, but preferably through donations to the church, a gift that 'a miracle' was expected to return.

With the federal Faith-Based Initiative, much of the social responsibilities of the US state now rests upon religious organizations, who are perceived as able to provide a holistic form of care, catering to both the need of the bodies and the souls of the homeless and the poor. I argue that when marginalized people become dependent on religious organizations for basic help, saying yes to salvation multiple times becomes a way of reciprocating the material gifts given by these organizations



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# Chapter one: Introduction

*As I am walking the last few blocks from the bus stop to Providing Hope's combined Men's Home and Community Center in South Central Los Angeles, I am struck by how empty the streets seem. It is Saturday around noon, but all the storefronts seem closed. It is only when I come up closer that I notice there are people in there, behind the lattice. I can hear music, dogs barking and children laughing, but it is all behind closed screen doors. The streets are hot despite the fact that the sun seems to be hidden behind a layer of smog. Some of the cars slow down as they pass me walking alone, but I ignore them and they drive on. The distance I am walking is only a few hundred meters, but I pass several churches that look permanently shut down, most of them Baptist. I also pass a few barber shops and a pet store that offers "baby pit bulls" on sale for \$75. When I turn the corner by the Men's Home, my view is dominated by a large motor home, where a couple live with their three large dogs. As I enter the Men's Home, I am warmly welcomed and offered breakfast by one of the eight med that currently live there. He asks me how I got there, and when I tell him I took the bus he seems worried that I had to walk all the way from the bus stop. "Girls shouldn't walk alone here, especially not white girls", he says. He explains to me that they had a shoot-out on the neighboring street just the week before, and that the police had closed off the streets, preventing him from walking his dog. "You should be especially careful", one of the other men interpolates, "You're not even saved".*

Los Angeles is the second largest city in the United States. With a population of almost four million people, nine million including the surrounding urban areas, the city is also one of the most ethnically diverse in America (Christie, 2007). Dominated by low-story houses and storefronts and with relatively few skyscrapers and tall buildings, LA is stretched out over a large area, and significant distances characterize the city. It is widely considered almost impossible to get around without a car, although driving, too, takes a lot of time because of the traffic. In popular culture, Los Angeles is maybe best known for the Hollywood film industry and the glamorous lives of the rich in areas like Beverly Hills or Bel Air. What I experienced, though, was that the richer areas with a good reputation, often dominated by fenced multi-million dollar mansions and well-kept streets and sidewalks, were few and far

between. I got the impression of a city with charm and diversity, but with large areas of urban decay and poverty far outnumbering the more glamorous parts. Despite the visible dissimilarities between the rich and the poor, though, these very different areas are geographically close to each other, and a short walk or bus ride could take me from the run-down storefronts in the South Central LA described above, to the gated communities in places like Marina Del Rey. I did not have a car, but the only challenge I found with getting around by bus was the significant amount of time it took. There are of course potential safety hazards with using public transport, especially late at night, but all in all I felt that I gained much more than I lost by taking the bus, both in terms of getting to know the city and its people, and by having time to write notes and reflect upon material right after things had happened.

## **Finding the field**

When I came to Los Angeles in early January 2012, my plan was to study homeless gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender youth. I had learned that these kids tend to move to cities known to have a large gay community, and thus they end up in cities like San Francisco, New York and Los Angeles. In Los Angeles especially, many of them hope to ‘make it in Hollywood’ and to work in the entertainment industry. Sadly, most of these kids lack the financial support and the luck needed to establish a career in such a harsh business, and many of them end up homeless. Understanding how potentially dangerous it could be to roam the streets at night alone I decided I had to go through an organization to get access to the field. Starting before I left for California and continuing once I got there, I contacted every organization I could find that dealt with homeless youth. Being viewed as part of the charity system rather than the street kids would give me a very different perspective on the situation, but with the high LA crime rates, I saw this as the safest option.

Although I expanded my field of interest to include all homeless youth, finding an organization proved difficult. It turned out that many of the ones I tried contacting were either shut down due to the economic recession, or they never replied to either e-mails or phone calls. The few that took in volunteers would not accept a foreigner they could not perform a certified background check on, and one youth shelter had strict rules that forbade talking about or writing down any information one acquired while volunteering. Another one

accepted me for an interview, but said that my age – 23 – put me too close to the youth we were helping, and “we like to be a little above and beyond them”, as the interviewer put it.

After a few weeks of extensively searching, I finally heard back from Providing Hope, a Christian organization that described their philosophy as providing support and help for troubled or homeless inner-city youth and adults, as well as running a few rehabilitation homes and doing charity outreaches where they gave out food and prayed for people that lived or worked on the streets of LA. The first person I spoke to in the organization was Michael, a white Arkansan in his mid-thirties and one of the two men that currently worked with Providing Hope full-time. He told me that they used to be very active up until about six months earlier, with numerous volunteers and outreach events, as well as a Men’s Home and a Women’s Home that provided housing and drug rehabilitation. Lately, though, the ministry had shrunk to two employees plus Lewis, the founder and pastor of the ministry, one weekly outreach and a loosely organized Men’s Home in South Central Los Angeles. I happily accepted Michael’s invitation to join them on what they called their “prostitute outreach” the following Friday night, and within the first ten minutes I had spent with them I had heard more about God’s miracles than I had in my entire life previously. Thus, instead of studying homeless sexual minorities, I ended up centering my fieldwork on the lives and practices of the volunteers in an evangelical Pentecostal charity organization.

## **Thesis questions**

Pentecostalism is widely considered to be the fastest growing religious denomination in the world (Cox 1995, p.120; Berger 1990; Barker 2005; Anderson 2004, p.281, Synan 1997, p. 215). According to the Pew Forum of Religious and Public Life, an estimated 279 million people worldwide are Pentecostal Christians with another 305 million in the Charismatic Christians-category (Pew Forum 2011). In this thesis, I will use the data I collected through my fieldwork with a small American Pentecostal charity organization to identify some of the reasons for the rapid spread of Pentecostalism. Why is Pentecostalism appealing to people? What happens when someone gets ‘saved’? How do Pentecostals work with evangelizing, and what strategies do they use to ‘save’ others? In addition, I want to look at everyday life as a Pentecostal Christian; how and when they prayed, how my informants structured their organization, their events and their economy, and also how they let people around them know

about the work they were doing. I will of course not be able to explain exactly why an estimated nine million people all over the world convert to Pentecostalism every year (Burgess 2006, p. xiii), nor can I say anything definitive about whether this number is right or not. Still, I hope that my material from Los Angeles about one particular group of Pentecostals can contribute to a larger discussion on the spread of faith, and that some of the reasons and motivations I identify can be applicable to Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianities worldwide.

## **Background: religion in America**

The United States of America does not have any official state or national religion, yet religion seems to permeate most aspects of American society. The role religion plays in the United States today has its roots in the very creation of the state, according to Butler, Wacker and Balmer; “The story of religion in America stands at the heart of the story of America itself” (2000, p. ix). Both because of the country’s multicultural heritage and because there is no preferred state religion, America has become one of the most religiously diverse countries in the world (Eck 2001). Recently, there has been some debate about the rise of the ‘nones’; people who state that they do not belong to any particular religion or religious denomination. According to a 2012 Pew Research Center report, ‘nones’ are on the rise and now constitutes just under 20% of the adult US population (2012, p. 9). Still, as the report states, “most of the ‘nones’ say they believe in God, and most describe themselves as religious, spiritual or both” (2012, p. 7). Although the number of people identifying as atheists and agnostics, 2.4 % and 3.3% respectively, are considered high and has nearly doubled in the past five years (Pew Research Center 2012, p. 13), this does show that an overwhelming majority of Americans believe in some spirit or higher power. In addition, according to a 2006 countrywide survey, atheists are the most distrusted minority in America, ranking below Muslims, gays and lesbians, recent immigrants and other minorities (Edgell et. al. 2006). Although religious life in America shows remarkable diversity, the majority of Americans adhere to some form of Christianity. Around 73 % of the US population defined themselves as Christians in 2012 (The Pew Forum 2012), making it by far the most common religion in the country. This number is a decline from 1990, when 86% of the population defined themselves as Christians (Kosmin and Keysar 2008), but Christianity is still a defining element in American society. For instance, there has never been a non-Christian president in the US.

# Pentecostalism

Pentecostalism as a Christian denomination traces its origins both from different healing movements across America in the late nineteenth century (Kay 2004) and more specifically from either January 1901, when a woman at a Bible school in Kansas spoke in tongues (Burgess 2006), or from the events known as the Azusa street revivals in Los Angeles in 1906, where a mix of ethnicities surprising for its time gathered to worship the Lord, repent of their sins and receive baptism (Kay 2004). Astounding numbers of people were drawn to the old building in LA, and the worshipping went on every day, from morning to evening, for over three years (Anderson, 2004). From here on, Pentecostalism spread tremendously, and is widely considered to be the largest new Christian movement of the twentieth century (Butler et. al. 2000). It is not always easy to strictly separate between classical Pentecostalism, Charismatic and Neo-Charismatic, and neither is it always necessary. Like Anderson (2004, p. 1), I use ‘Pentecostal’ to include all three groups. The differences are relatively small, and the principles of spiritual gifts and a personal relationship with Christ are the same. Angelus Temple, the church I attended with my informants in Los Angeles, belonged to the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, and thus is a classical Pentecostal church.

The name Pentecostalism stems from the New Testament, Acts 2:4, when on the first Day of the Pentecost “All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them” (New International Version). The belief in the ability to speak in tongues and interpret them is an important and even defining element in Pentecostal Christianity today, along with faith in other spiritual gifts or charismata, like divine healing and the ability to say prophecies. William K. Kay claims that these beliefs highlight a larger discussion about the relationship between belief and experience; “belief and experience can interact with each other so that, on some occasions, belief conforms to experience and, on other occasions, belief is primary and either informs the interpretation of experience or else shapes experience in some other fundamental way” (Kay 2011, p. 7). Throughout this thesis, I will attempt to show how my Pentecostal informants negotiated everyday events to fit into their beliefs. Although my informants never used the term “Pentecostals” themselves, they would confirm when asked if that was what they were, and did not in any way seem to oppose the term. Thus, I see no problem with using it to describe them.

## **Faith-based charity work**

Providing Hope was a charity organization, but just as importantly it was an evangelizing one. Going out on the streets usually had at least two main purposes; one, giving people something to eat, often referring them to a shelter or a rehabilitation program, and two, praying for them and leading them to Jesus. This dual goal was expressed well by my informant Eric; “Even if it were to turn out that there is no God”, he said, “We will still have done something good for people”.

Around the year 2000, President George W. Bush launched the so-called ‘Faith-Based Initiative’, which rests on the idea that faith-based organizations can provide holistic social services (Sager 2011) to the poor and homeless, catering to both their physical and their spiritual needs. This idea meant an “expansion of government funding for religious organizations that provide social services and rehabilitative programs in local communities” (Elisha, 2011, p.12). Through a combination of federal funds, tax-exempt private donations and volunteering, religious organizations are the main providers of social care in many areas. Pastor of the Dream Center and Angelus Temple Matthew Barnett seems to agree with the idea that lies at the core of the Faith-Based Initiative. In his book about the establishing of the Center, he writes that “For years, we Americans have believed the crazy notion that it’s the government’s job to be involved with social programs and it’s the church’s job to win souls” (Barnett 2000, p.71). He goes on to claim that this belief is against Jesus and concludes that everything his organization is doing helps promote the winning of souls (Barnett 2000).

However, according to Rebecca Sager, Faith-Based social services become problematic when the receivers of benefits are required to participate in religious rituals like prayer or even conversion in order to get food, but also when the organizations do not take into account that many of the homeless are already Christians that want to keep religion a private matter (Sager 2011).

## **The Dream Center**

The Dream center was described by one of my informants as a “spiritual hospital”, and according to the Center’s web site, they “find and fill the needs of over 50,000 individuals and families each month” (dreamcenter.org, 2013). The center is located at the former Queen of Angels Hospital building in Echo Park, LA, and covers almost 9 acres of land. It is inhabited



by around 650 people in various rehabilitation programs and housing for homeless families and troubled youth, as well as volunteers, interns, visiting church groups from all over the world and students enrolled in the Movement – the Center’s own college-age ministry and pastor training program. After the founding of the center in 1994, several other independent Dream Centers have opened up around America and in other countries. The Center offers twice-a-week guided tours for visitors, and uses church services partially as a platform to advertise their projects and events. During his first presidential election campaign, George W Bush visited the Dream Center and called it “a model for Faith-Based organizations” (Crosby 2011). In 2001, Matthew Barnett and his wife Caroline Barnett became senior pastors of Angelus Temple, a historical building constructed under the leadership of Aimee Semple McPherson, a ‘Pentecostal celebrity’ in the 1920s who also founded the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel (Blumhofer 1993). Angelus Temple is recognized as a *megachurch*, defined as a Protestant congregation with an average of more than two thousand people attending services every week (Thumma and Travis 2007). The services involved a rock band playing worship music, charismatic speakers, testimonies from residents at the Dream Center and other features that engaged the large audience greatly. All residents at the Dream Center were required to attend services at Angelus Temple.

## Providing Hope

Providing Hope, the organization I spent most of my fieldwork with, existed as an organization long before they started cooperating with the Dream Center. As I heard the story presented numerous times, Pastor Lewis had sold most of his belongings and come to LA almost thirty years earlier to serve God and the youth of the city. At the organization’s peak, they claimed to have had 40 employees, over 40 weekly outreaches, transitional homes for men, women, youth, mothers with small children and, in addition, a drug and alcohol rehabilitation program as well as a leadership mentoring program. As mentioned, when I started my fieldwork, the organization was significantly reduced, both in volunteers and in activity. The reasons for the decline were many, but an important cause was the fact that Providing Hope had to close the different homes they administered at the Dream Center when Center themselves needed the space to house homeless families, a group that has grown bigger since the economic recession started in 2008. In 2012, Providing Hope still kept an office at the Dream Center, and Michael and Joseph, the two volunteers working full-time

with PH, lived there. Throughout the time I spent with Providing Hope, though, the organization grew both in activity and in the number of people working with it.

## Method

I have largely relied on participant observation as a method for data collection throughout my fieldwork (Frøystad 2003, p. 41), and both conversations and participation in activities became means to gather information for me. Early on, I decided to let what my informants were occupied with lead the direction of my research, and instead of doing structured interviews, I tried to pick up on and participate in conversations that evolved from the activities we were engaging in. Since I came to Los Angeles with a different purpose for my fieldwork, I did not have many theories or predefined analytical perspectives on the group I was studying. While this has its disadvantages in terms of knowing the field and having a clear notion of what exactly one wants to find out, I believe that knowing less about the group also worked to my benefit; knowing very little about Pentecostalism and church culture in America, I had to have a lot explained. When I appeared genuinely interested in my informants' faith and the work they did, I am fairly sure this contributed to the acceptance and inclusion I felt from them.

Although I knew less about Pentecostalism, I did have some knowledge about urban homelessness, and in the very beginning of my time with Providing Hope, I still thought about using the access they could give me to the streets to study the homeless. This turned out to be almost impossible, though, since the homeless and the other people we met on the streets moved around so much that we rarely met the same people twice. In addition, we could never have more than brief conversations with the sex workers, for instance, since their pimps were always paying attention and could become threatening if we took up too much of the girls' time. I decided, in line with George E. Marcus' approach of "following the people" (Marcus 1998, p. 106), to study the Christians in Providing Hope, going where they went and doing what they did, to concentrate on how they viewed the people they met, and what their goals were when they went out to meet these people. In order to do this, I joined Providing Hope in their steadily increasing number of outreaches where the goal was to spread the word of God, pray for people and to give out food. We went to parking lots and liquor stores in South Central Los Angeles at night, to low-income neighborhoods in the same area during daytime, we gave out food to the homeless on the beaches of Santa Monica and Venice, and

we sometimes went to inner city high schools and colleges in attempts to get the youth to start Bible clubs. We also brought groups from other churches or Bible schools with us on some outreaches, and we organized neighborhood barbecues with anything from five to one hundred guests. In addition, I went to Angelus Temple's two or three weekly services, sometimes alone but usually with volunteers from Providing Hope. I also joined a few of the outreaches the Dream Center organized, to get a bigger perspective both on urban poverty and on faith-based social activity. In this thesis, 'social work' and 'social activity' is defined as providing a marginalized part of the population with food and sometimes clothes, but also to seek to improve their quality of life in other ways, tasks that might otherwise be done to the state.

Since beds at the Dream Center were limited with long waiting lists and since Providing Hope's Home was for men exclusively, I did not get the chance to live with my informants and instead rented an apartment in Brentwood, a central neighborhood in West LA. Throughout my fieldwork, it was often easy to let people I met know I was doing research, since Los Angeles is a city where many of the inhabitants come from other places. "Where are you from?" was a common question when meeting someone new, and I usually explained that I was a student who had come from Norway to do a research project on Providing Hope. Still, I acknowledged the fact that I could never inform absolutely everyone we met, and that it was usually assumed that I, too, was an evangelizing Pentecostal until I said otherwise.

The role I took in the different events varied. I always helped out with practicalities; carrying food and tables or making sandwiches. Sometimes I felt that my role was much more participating than observatory, but this was often when we were only three or four people working altogether, and we all had to take part in the work. At other times, I was observing more than participating, especially when it came to explicit performances of faith, like leading a prayer for someone. Since I define myself as an atheist and all my informants knew this, I felt that it would have been wrong of me to just make up a prayer I did not believe in, even if my informants on a few occasions asked me to do this. I also refrained from seeking out people if we were out of food and only had reading material left; I find proselytizing problematic and could not get myself to give homeless and suffering people flyers that told them they were going to Hell if they did not do as recommended. Still, these occasions were so few that I doubt my informants even noticed my reluctance to hand out reading material.

All in all, being an atheist among believers was surprisingly rewarding, both in how I was accepted as one of the group, and in terms of gathering research material. Previously, I had never properly reflected upon my own status as a non-believer, growing up in a culture where the majority only goes to church for Christmas Eve and funerals. When Eric asked me on my first night out with Providing Hope what I *was* if I was not a Christian, I did not know much about the prejudice and distrust atheists often meet in America, as I have described above. As someone outside the faith, though, I was encouraged to ask questions, and I gained a lot of information I might not have gotten if I was more of an ‘insider’, religion-wise. I hope I have been able to see what they considered everyday actions as ‘exciting’ and special enough for me to notice and analyze, things I might not have reacted to if I had been a fellow Pentecostal. I was asked a lot of question about what it was like to not believe, but I was lucky to have informants that viewed me as a resource and not a burden. After a while, I felt like part of the group, and when I thanked Michael and Joseph for letting me come along, they said that it was they who should thank me for helping them out. I never felt unwelcome or excluded based on my gender, quite the contrary. In fact, Michael said they needed my “female touch” in their outreach work – almost all of the other volunteers in Providing Hope were men –, and it seemed like the fact that I was a non-believer was almost irrelevant compared to what they thought I could contribute only by virtue of being female. Still, I know that my fieldwork would have been completely different had I been male, especially because it most likely would have allowed me to live at the Men’s Home.

The acceptance I met, though, did rest upon the hope and belief that I, too, would soon find Jesus and be saved. I was frequently told that if I just prayed hard enough it would happen to me too, and few seemed to fully understand that I did not have any desire to convert. Often, even in the middle of everyday conversation, I was asked if I wanted to take Jesus into my heart in the same manner that people out on the streets were asked. I saw these constant attempts to save me as interesting rather than challenging, and I genuinely think that my atheism was unproblematic to my informants, as long as I contributed in the other parts of the work they were doing. There seemed to be no definitive ‘others’ to my informants, because every non-Pentecostal was a possible convert. I could not be put into a definitive category, because in their eyes I was only a prayer away from being one of them. Never having believed in any god made it harder for me to understand what it was like to have such an all-encompassing faith, but still, I am very satisfied with the relationship that developed between us. To ensure anonymity, I have created fictional names for the people and institutions

involved, with the exception of the Dream Center and Angelus Temple – which are well-known both in LA and in the Pentecostal community – and its leader Matthew Barnett, who must be considered a public figure. I also found it impossible to anonymize a city as unique as Los Angeles. Because I have chosen not to change people’s *stories* significantly, there is a possibility that people who work with or have worked with Providing Hope or the Dream Center may recognize someone. Still, I have done my best to make sure my informants are unrecognizable.

## Why study urban Christians?

Half of the human population lives in towns and cities (Pardo and Prato, 2012). Traditionally, urban anthropology and fieldwork in cities – maybe especially cities in developed countries – can be said to have been viewed as less ‘real’ than rural fieldwork, and according to Italo Pardo and Giuliana B. Prato, the study of life in cities has been more closely associated with sociology and the Chicago school than with anthropology (2012, p. 5). Still, as they argue, “the in-depth knowledge offered by long-term anthropological fieldwork has a contribution to make to our understanding – and hopefully to the betterment – of our increasingly urbanized world” (2012, p. 20). Prato, in the same volume, presents Louis Dumont’s question about what distinguishes anthropology from sociology and his answer that “anthropology cannot be defined solely in terms of the study of the exotic others” (Dumont [1952] in Prato, 2012 p. 79). There have also been debates about how ‘proper’ anthropology ‘at home’ is, maybe especially in Norway (Frøystad 2003, *my translation*). Marianne Gullestad (in an interview with Lien and Melhuus, 2011) sees “the traditional division of anthropology and sociology, as well as the division between mainstream anthropology and anthropology ‘at home’, as an inheritance from the binary segregationalism of colonialism” (Lien and Melhuus, 2011 p. 135). My experience is that although both urban anthropology and anthropology from developed countries in some ways can be characterized as ‘the study of us’, the Pentecostals I met in Los Angeles still felt highly like ‘exotic others’ to me.

In her article “Between the Verandah and the Mall” (2012), Henrike Donner discusses how urban anthropology is biased towards public space and institutions rather than private homes (Donner 2012, p. 177). She claims that “the prioritization of the public over ‘the private’ does also reflect liberal ideas about the spaces where the legitimate common production of culture takes place” (2012, p. 178). The distinction she makes between institutions and private homes

is interesting to my fieldwork, because the majority of my informants actually lived in institutions. To them there could be no clear distinction between the institution they were part of and their homes, except the physical barrier of the door between the bedroom and the living room in the Men's Home, or the stairs down from Michael and Joseph's shared room to the common dining hall. Since the Men's Home also functioned as a community center, the men living there had to accept the fragile boundary between public and private. Michael and Joseph shared their bunk-bed dorm room with two other men, and the spaces for privacy were limited. All the young people doing ministry training at the Dream Center also shared rooms, as was the case with the participants in the different rehabilitation programs. Although there was a distinction, the public and the private got mixed together and the lines were blurred.

Some claim that it is difficult for anthropologists to study Christians, partially because "Christians, almost wherever they are, appear at once too similar to anthropologists to be worthy of study and too meaningfully different to be easily made sense of by the use of standard anthropological tools" (Robbins 2003, p. 192). Robbins goes on in "Continuity Thinking and the Problem of Christian Culture" (2007), to argue that there is no actual community for 'the anthropology of Christianity', and that this partially can be explained with anthropology's focus on cultural continuity instead of discontinuity and change (Robbins 2007). Christianity, he claims, often stresses radical change and even expects it, and the different modes of time and belief that anthropology and Christianity hold become difficult (2007, p. 5). In addition, the relative neglect of Christianity as a study object is not an oversight, but actively produced by those who avoid Christianity when they set out to study religion (Robbins 2007, p. 6). I will not completely disagree with Robbins, but I do not see the Christians I studied as too similar to me as an anthropologist. Although I did not set out to study Christianity, I quickly found it highly interesting, and I think this was largely due to the fact that it was so completely different from what I had experienced before. It seems to me that Robbins is assuming that the average western anthropologist is always familiar with 'Christian culture' because Christianity is the dominant religion in the Western world. It absolutely is, but growing up in Norway, a country and a culture that is both officially Protestant *and* perceived to be fairly Americanized did not make the Christian Americans I met throughout my fieldwork less 'exotic'. Although I was familiar with the language and culture in the US, and to some degree with certain forms of Christianity, I would claim that my fieldwork was in no way 'anthropology at home'.

## Structure of the thesis

From this introduction, I will move on in chapter two to present and discuss some of the different salvation narratives I was given by my informants. Relating it to the bigger question of why so many people become Pentecostals, I look at how exactly my informants defined converts, and also how they used their own stories of being saved as tools to convert others. Moving on to prayer in chapter three, I discuss speaking in tongues and other ways Pentecostals perform their Christianity. In this analysis of the performance of religion is also a discussion of the people we met on the streets, and using Michel Foucault's notions on discourse analysis (1999), I will look at how my informants talked about these people. In chapter four, the discussion is focused on belief in spiritual healing and embodied religious practices, as well as gift-giving (Mauss 2002); in addition to giving away material gifts such as food and clothes, my informants saw what they did as giving the greatest gift of all; salvation in the name of the Lord. The fifth chapter offers a discussion on economy, documentation and especially charismatic leadership, another factor that may play a big role in recruiting new Pentecostals. The relations between charity givers and charity receivers are also highlighted; I argue that the fact that many of my informants have backgrounds similar to the people they minister to is an important factor. Finally, my arguments and findings are summed up in the concluding remarks.





# Chapter two: The dynamics of saving and being saved

*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son,  
that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life*

John 3:16

*Ron was twenty-one years old when he was saved. According to the story he gave me one Friday night in South Central Los Angeles as we were looking for sex workers we could talk to about God, he had been part of a drug trade ring moving marihuana from Canada to the US. The FBI were chasing him, he had just lost his girlfriend “and everything else” as he put it, and he was sitting by a lake in the rain, ready to kill himself with a gun. Ron thought about his mother who had always prayed to Jesus, and despite not being religious himself, he called out: “God, if you exist, give me a sign”. Suddenly the rain stopped around him and the sky opened up. A human form seemingly made of light appeared in the sky, and Ron heard God’s voice saying “Now do you know that I am real? Now do you know that I love you?”. Ron started crying and threw the gun into the lake, before he went home where he cried all night. “I didn’t even know how to pray”, Ron told me, “I had been a non-believer all my life!”. The next day he confessed all his criminal activities and his suicide attempt to his mother, who took him to a church where a pastor talked about Jesus and then prayed personally for Ron. With tears in his eyes, Ron described the salvation to me as a warm feeling of love that entered his body, almost like drinking hard liquor, except the feeling stayed there. This was how he was saved. Then, according to Ron, his eleven year old sister gave him her pink kid’s Bible and said “Now you have seen it and felt it, it’s time to learn about it”. Ron was clearly very moved while telling me this story, and the next morning Michael, another volunteer, half-jokingly told me that giving me his testimony had worn Ron out. But, as Ron said, he just had to let me know about the unconditional love I could experience if I was saved.*

## Salvation and conversion

“Saved” is an emic term that my informants used for anyone that had accepted Jesus as their personal savior, taken him into their hearts, repented of all their sins and been forgiven. These people would go to Heaven when they died. Scholars would refer to it as conversion, the act of adopting a new religion or changing one’s existing religion, either from one to another or between different denominations within the same religion. As far as I recall, none of the people whose salvation testimony I heard had converted from another religion entirely; they had all been non-believers – not necessarily identifying as atheists or agnostics, but fitting the description – or belonged to another Christian denomination like Baptism or Catholicism. A line I heard several times in various versions was “I thought I was a real Christian, but then I was saved!”. What do Pentecostal Christians mean with the term “real Christian”? In this chapter, I will discuss the events of giving and receiving personal salvation and the stories connected to this. In addition, I will look at how the Pentecostals I studied approached their goal of worldwide evangelism, and how they used their own salvation narratives in the work they did with trying to convert others.

Pentecostalism is an evangelical faith (Duffield and Van Cleave 1983), and I will sometimes use the term *evangelicals* when talking about the Christians I met during my fieldwork, as well as the term *Charismatic Christians* discussed in the introduction chapter, or simply *believers*. The term *evangelical* comes from the Greek word *euangelion*, meaning “bringing good news” (Thacker, 2008). In Matthew 28:19-20, Jesus tells his disciples to “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you”. Far from all evangelicals are Pentecostal, but all Pentecostals are by definition evangelical.

In Pentecostal theology, the only demands for receiving salvation is believing that humans can be forgiven of their sins and reconciled with God through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It also requires the believer to be *born-again* – a spiritual rebirth or regeneration – and to accept Christ as their personal lord and savior (Duffield and Van Cleave 1983). Although my informants preferred the term ‘salvation’ over ‘conversion’, I have chosen to use both. The term *saved* in the English language has several meanings outside a religious context, but when it is used here, it implies the same meaning my informants gave it; someone choosing to “take Jesus into their hearts”, as my informants usually put it. Still, as it turned out, *saved* was far from an unambiguous term.

## Changing a life

In *The Anthropology of Religious Conversion*, Andrew Buckser and Stephen D. Glazier write that “To change one’s religion is to change one’s world, to voluntarily shift the basic presuppositions upon which both self and others are understood” (2003, p. xi). The stories I heard of personal salvation corresponded well with this statement; not only were lives dramatically changed, but some of the initial emotions even seemed to come back when testimonies were given. It impressed me how Pentecostals managed to bring forth the same strong feelings every time they retold their conversion narrative, despite the fact that for some, this event could have occurred decades ago. In his study of charismatic protestant conversions in Sweden, Simon Coleman finds that converting others can be a self-constitutive act for charismatic Christians, and that conversion itself is not necessarily only an attempt to transform the potential convert, but also “a means of recreating or re-converting the charismatic self” (Coleman 2003, p. 17). These are some of the same discoveries I did in Los Angeles, too; the frequency and intensity with which these personal salvation narratives were given indicates that they were more than tools for converting others; they were also meaningful acts of faith for the people telling them.

In his book on megachurches and Christian social outreach in Knoxville, Tennessee, Omri Elisha describes how his informants saw charity and social outreaches as a “legitimate and necessary component of evangelism” (Elisha 2011, p. 8). His informants were fundamentalist evangelicals and not Pentecostals, but much of what Elisha finds about social outreach and megachurches corresponds with my findings in Los Angeles. Still, I would claim that the two examples differ in one major aspect; while helping the poor was a part of evangelism for Elisha’s informants in Knoxville, the relationship between the two seemed almost reversed with the Dream Center and to some degree Providing Hope. It appeared that instead, evangelism was a legitimate component of social outreach. Although the religious component was always present in the charity work we did, providing those who needed it the most with food, shelter, drug rehabilitation and other things often appeared to be prioritized slightly higher. At least this was true for the outreaches I participated in with the Dream Center. With them, I went to skid row, an area consisting of a few blocks in downtown LA described by some informants as the one area in all of America with the highest density of homeless people. The name of the area is a nickname often used for ‘shabby’ urban areas and is not an officially registered name, hence the lack of capitalization. At skid row, we met men and

women in utter despair who were often overwhelmed by the smallest of gifts, and every single person I met in that area said they already believed in God. The young volunteers at the Dream Center seemed to understand that making sure a homeless and hungry drug-addict belonged to the ‘right’ denomination came second to covering their basic needs. As I will elaborate on in chapter five, the Dream Center seemed to have a more conscious approach to the relationship between evangelization and social work than Providing Hope did.

These differences might partially be rooted in the fact that few of the places I went with Providing Hope were as ‘bad’ as skid row. We did meet a lot of homeless people, but we also spoke to several inner-city inhabitants who had a place to live and even a job. They were still poor and those who had jobs often worked for low wages, but their needs were perceived by Providing Hope to be more spiritual than material. Thus, evangelization could be emphasized. Still, I do recognize a statement from one of Elisha’s informants: “you can’t talk to an empty stomach” (Elisha 2011, p. 9). The outreaches I participated in with the Dream Center were limited to one area, though, and I assume they had a different approach when they went to places with less drug use and poverty than skid row. Either way, their goal was always to “go out there and love people”, a phrase volunteers at the Dream Center repeated as often as they could.

Whether saving people or feeding them was the *main* priority, the goal was to do both when we went out on the streets or to places where the homeless and other marginalized groups were known to stay in Los Angeles. Providing Hope was giving food to those who needed it, and at the same time trying to get the most people possible to give their lives to Jesus. On a few occasions we bought groceries and made sandwiches to give out, but most of the times we took whatever snacks we had been given by the Dream Center food bank – usually small bags of chips or candy, cookies or crackers, much of it just past its expiration date. Here, food was used as a conversation starter. The opening line would usually be “do you want some snacks? It’s free!”, and if people accepted the snacks without walking on, one of the volunteers would ask if the person had any spiritual beliefs or if they needed prayer for anything. To better explain how salvation attempts on the streets worked for my informants, I would like to use the following pages to present and exemplify what I identified as three different ways of doing ‘salvation work’ in Providing Hope – loving, scaring and planting a seed.

## Strategies of salvation

Ana was of Filipino descent, around 40, a mother of two and what the others often referred to as “a true evangelist”. She had grown up Catholic, but according to herself her life had changed dramatically when she had been saved and became a “real Christian” not long ago. Her salvation story, which I heard numerous times, was fairly similar to Ron’s in terms of involving a dramatic, physical experience of God’s presence. Ana told me she had had lost her mother to cancer and that her father was brutally murdered. After having been bothered by an unspecified illness for almost twenty years, spending most of her time being angry and doing what she now considered to be immoral things, like swearing, smoking marihuana and having premarital sex, Ana called out to God to save her. She promised God that if He cured her, she would fully devote her life to him. One morning she took her Bible to a hilltop, and asked God to speak to her. Suddenly she felt a wind, and hence, she said, she was saved. I never got a proper explanation to why, but it seemed like Catholicism was my informants’ most disliked form of Christianity – when I told them that the state religion of my home country was Protestantism, Ana said “Well, at least it’s better than Catholicism!”. To them, a ‘real Christian’ was a Pentecostal, and all other sets of beliefs seemed to be equally unsatisfactory to them. Being an atheist, a Muslim or Hindu seemed to be no worse than being a Baptist or a Mormon, because all of these were equally ‘unreal’.

Ana’s opening line to strangers, regardless of what situations we met them in, was “Jesus loves you”. She seemed completely fearless in her attempt to win souls, and more than once I thought about how her apparent inability to consider the context before approaching someone would put her at risk on the streets, especially late at night. Whether we were ordering tacos at a drive-through restaurant or talking to the police deep down in the ‘ghetto’, she would start the conversation by saying something about the love of Jesus. Because of her enthusiasm the others had nicknamed her “the Tornado”, and they said that her approach was fairly common for the ‘newly saved’ – it was only two years since Ana had found Jesus. Although she always emphasized the positive sides of choosing a life with Christ, she seemed to sometimes almost scare possible converts away by being aggressively evangelical. Ana was also the most intense in trying to get me to convert; every single time we met, she asked me whether I had talked to God yet.

Lewis, the pastor, leader and founder of Providing Hope had another approach to evangelism. Although he was never specific about his own salvation story, he had his own narrative that

went “I was just a simple farmer when God told me to go to Los Angeles almost thirty years ago”. Something that was often mentioned, both by him and by the other volunteers in Providing Hope, were the stories of how Pastor Lewis used to spend nights on the streets of Los Angeles sleeping next to the homeless youth that resided there, to show them he cared about them. As the ministry leader, he insisted that everyone working for Providing Hope should ask the people we met what he referred to as the turtle question; “If you were to die today, are you certain that you would spend eternity in God’s presence?”. Focusing on the negative sides of not being one of the saved rather than the positive sides of accepting Jesus, he frequently talked about the Hell he believed in as a concrete, physical place, a “place of weeping and gnashing of teeth” to avoid at all costs, a phrase mentioned several times in the Gospel of Matthew in the Bible. Although he accepted me as a volunteer despite my atheism and sometimes openly praised me for the work I did with Providing Hope, he lectured me several times to make sure I knew I was going to Hell when I died. Pastor Lewis also talked about sinful actions and sinful thoughts in a way that none of the other Pentecostals I encountered seemed to be occupied with. Others did mention once in a while that we are all sinners, but that was more to point out that no one is perfect than to scare anyone. Despite his often frightening approach, Pastor Lewis seemed to have a special touch with underprivileged people and managed to – according to himself – convert many. Still, I often felt uneasy when he tried to scare people in very difficult life situations into believing in God ‘in the right way’, i.e. becoming a Pentecostal.

The way of converting others that seemed to me to be the most ‘effective’ in terms of getting people to actually commit to living their life with Jesus, was the approach Michael used the most. He sometimes referred to it as “planting a seed”; talking for extended periods of time with one or a few people about Jesus and the benefits of leading a Christian life. Unlike many of the others, Michael did not have a dramatic salvation story; all he said was that he had grown up in a secular home, and that he had found God in his late teens and gone to a Christian college. After seven years in higher education he had debts, but working as an unpaid volunteer made him eligible for deferment. His goal could be described as something like a temporal tithe; he said that he wanted to spend a tenth of his life serving God. Michael did not always ask people if they wanted to invite Jesus into their hearts, but he always made sure they had heard of the Gospel, and that they knew about the possibilities that lay in accepting Jesus. He wanted those we met and talked to to become more curious about a life with God and to maybe try going to church or to an arranged Bible study event to see if it

appealed to them. Often, Michael would center his conversations with people on other things than salvation; he asked about life on the streets and problems in the police in a way that made him seem empathetic and genuinely occupied with what life as a marginalized person was rather than just caring about increasing the numbers of new converts.

As probably the only self-identifying atheist many of the Christians had spent a longer period of time with after their own conversion, I was frequently on the receiving end of all of these salvation strategies. Still, I never felt unwelcome or unappreciated because of my lack of faith. It seemed like the Christians I met found it more interesting than negative that I did not believe in God, and I often got questions like “when did you make the choice of not believing?” and “but how do you think we got here, then?”. The two men I spent the most time with, Michael and Joseph, rarely mentioned my atheism in our daily work. Still, when I was asked by Christians we met for the first time how long I had been saved and I replied that I was not a believer, either Michael or Joseph could mention that they were sure Jesus would find me “in due time”. There was never any pressure on me to convert and they said that they respected my atheism and appreciated my honesty about it, but as I discussed in the introduction chapter, I sensed an underlying assumption that soon, when I had learned enough about it, I would ‘surrender’. Often, they would let me know that they would pray for my conversion and ask me to just pray harder myself.

Omri Elisha (2011) also touches upon this theme. He is a non-practicing Jew, and while his informants talked about his lack of faith in a respectful manner, they let him know that they were praying for him; not only his salvation, but his fieldwork, his family and his friends. Elisha also describes how the fact that everyone knew he would stay in the church environment for an extended period of time made them reluctant to “pressure him into faith”, and they rather wanted to let him learn to know the faith over time (Elisha 2011, p. 31). I felt the same with many of my informants, although some of those who were very enthusiastic about my interest in their work in the beginning, seemed to ‘give up on me’ over time, and the initial warm welcome I had felt in church quickly cooled off. This did not go for the people I worked the closest with, though; they seemed to grow more appreciative of my participation in their work and less intrigued about my atheism. Because conversions on the street were brief, as will be discussed below, and because all the people I spent much time with were already saved and always saw their own conversions in light of the worldview they now had, the effort to convert me is the best example I have of a conversion attempt that went on over time.

## Counting conversions

What made Michael's calm way of attempting to lead people to Jesus less popular with Pastor Lewis, and also one of the main tendencies I noticed when we worked with saving people, was the heavy emphasis on counting. Pentecostalism is known for its explosive growth in most parts of the world over the last decade, and as discussed in the introduction, it is widely considered to be the fastest growing Christian denomination in the world (Cox 1995, p. 120; Berger 1990; Barker 2005; Anderson 2004, p. 281, Synan 1997, p. 215). The estimated nine million converts every year (Burgess 2006, p. xiii) undoubtedly make worldwide Pentecostal growth an established fact. But who are the ones counting all the converts? The 2011 Pew Report on global Christianity explains that their numbers on the world Pentecostal population is «based in large part on figures provided by Christian organizations around the world» (Pew Report 2011, p. 17). It appears that in many statistics, the main source for the number of converts to Pentecostalism is the Pentecostals themselves. This reveals some problems with credibility, especially when I observed how converts were counted. When going out with Providing Hope, Pastor Lewis was highly occupied with counting the number of people saved, the number of people fed and the number of people prayed for in all the events and outreaches we did.

Providing Hope was considered an independent organization, but as mentioned it was affiliated with the Dream Center. Most of the events were arranged independently, but the Saturday outreaches were part of a bigger event organized by the Dream Center. They called it their “flagship outreach ministry” (dreamcenter.org), where hundreds of volunteers – most of them youth from LA and from visiting groups – spent a few hours Saturday morning going out to locations in the inner city and simply asking people that lived there if there was anything the group could do for them. Many of the volunteers went to places where the main focus could be work like painting, garden work or organizing games for the neighborhood kids, but I only went out on two of the different locations, mainly to get more consistency in my fieldwork. During the first half of my stay in Los Angeles I participated in the skid row outreach. As discussed above, what we did there was mainly giving out food or simply talking to people. I never heard anything of salvation or counting the saved when we went to this area.

During the other half of my fieldwork, though, I participated in the outreaches Providing Hope did in South Central LA on Saturdays. This was more loosely organized and we never



took out any of the young volunteers from the Dream Center. Usually, it was only Michael, Joseph, me and a few of the men living at the Providing Hope Men's Home taking whatever surplus food they had at the house, driving a few blocks down to an area with low-income housing and handing out bags of food to those who lived in the neighborhood. Often people would know we were there and come to pick up bags, and sometimes we went around knocking on doors to offer people food. Every week, in the van driving back to the Dream Center where Michael and Joseph lived and where I would take the bus home from, we had to complete a form given to us by the Dream Center. The form was simple, and all that had to be filled out was location, number of doors knocked on and number of people saved. The report then had to be given back to the Dream Center for statistical purposes. This highlights how counting the saved was not just one of the 'hang-ups' Pastor Lewis had; it was a tendency among other Pentecostals as well. Simon Coleman found this in his data from Sweden, too; "The numbers of souls saved, bodies healed, resources collected, countries visited and churches started in this evangelical economy are the subject of constant appraisal, and are located within narratives of inexorable progress and growth" (2000, p. 169). In the following, I will analyze how the counting practices of my informants may have contributed to the high number of new Pentecostals yearly.

## **Defining a convert**

What struck me about this preoccupation with counting the number of saved and fed, though, is how inaccurate or imprecise these counts could be in relation to what *I* thought salvation *was*. The number of people fed was usually estimated by counting how many sandwiches or bags of chips we had given out, even though many people received two or more of each item. Still, this was probably the most effective way of counting, and when the main point was to show that we had fed people, it was not always important whether the number was said to be 50 or 80. The number of saved, on the other hand, was different. Surprisingly often, we landed on a round number, like five, ten or sometimes even fifteen people.

What all these occasions of salvation counting had in common for me was that I could never seem to understand exactly who they had saved. Although I fully participated in serving and talking to the people we met, I never converted or tried to convert anyone myself. It appeared both impossible and ethically problematic to me to try to convince someone to give their life to something I neither believed in nor felt I had enough knowledge about. In the beginning,

when I learned that several people had been saved the night before, I thought that something major had to have happened when I was off somewhere else, talking to someone else or just not paying enough attention. But, as I started focusing on these salvations and the counting of them, I realized that “getting saved” was in no way an identical experience for everyone, and often not even a remotely similar one.

After hearing the many different, but all life-changing, somatic and energetically retold narratives of being born again, both on stage in church and from Pentecostals I spoke to, I expected that the event of saving someone on the streets would be just that; not necessarily visibly somatic with instant speaking in tongues, but certainly a life-altering experience that the convert would be able to vindicate the time and place of in their own conversion narrative. Never really witnessing anything resembling the amazing stories I had heard, I began to understand that there was a certain double standard to understanding the concept of salvation for my informants. On one hand, their own salvation was an extremely important event in their life when they experienced something that made them dedicate their lives to serving God. On the other hand, the requirements for counting someone as saved during an outreach were so low I am fairly sure that many of the people who were counted as saved had no idea they had just been recognized as someone who had taken Jesus into their heart and promised to live a life serving him. Michael once told me that in the year before I came, 2011, they had saved a total of 1200 people. Although the organization was more active back then, this means more than 23 salvations a week, something I doubt would be possible without keeping the requirements for being counted as saved very low. A few times I could give them the benefit of doubt, if for instance I had been asked to walk in a different direction than pastor Lewis, who technically could have converted the five people he claimed in that half hour I was somewhere else. But certain nights the count was up to fifteen people converted, and I was sure that only ten people at most had been even talked to for more than a minute.

I am sure the Pentecostals never thought of their exaggerations as lying – they just seemed to have different standards for what constituted a salvation in themselves compared to people on the streets. A situation that I think exemplifies this inaccuracy well comes from one time we had gone to Venice Beach to feed the large homeless population that reside there. Rodriguez, one of the older volunteers from the Men’s Home, asked a young man receiving a sandwich whether he wanted to take Jesus into his heart, and the man replied “Not today, sir, I’ve done it so many times already”. Certainly, if one can be counted every single time one decides to

answer that question, it is not difficult to reach high numbers of conversions. And thus, it is easier to question the correctness of the number of converts Pentecostals report worldwide.

## **Salvation in church and on the streets**

The tendency to exaggerate numbers was also something I observed in church. Toward the end of every sermon, as it was reaching its climax, the speaker or Pastor leading it would initiate the classical altar call; he asked everyone to close their eyes in prayer, and to first raise their hands, then come up towards the stage if they had decided to give their lives to Jesus on this particular day, so he could see them and bless them specifically. Those who needed healing or what Simon Coleman calls “spiritual reinforcement” (2003, p. 18) were also asked to come up. As part of a typical charismatic non-stop flow of blessings and prayer, the speaker would always say “I see hands coming up all over the room, everywhere hands are going up!”. We were urged to keep our eyes closed in prayer, but whenever I quickly peeked up, I saw that very few people raised their hands to indicate their own immediate conversion.

This is a point that Coleman makes, too; in his Charismatic church in Sweden, Coleman noticed that no one really used this occasion to dedicate their life to Jesus during regular services (Coleman 2003, p. 18). The difference between Coleman’s example and mine from Angelus, though, is that in Angelus Temple, the altar call did not clearly distinguish between the different purposes that people that came up had. To me, it would be impossible to know who meant what. Was it their first time in church and the first time they met the love of Jesus, or were they already committed Christians who just wanted to get a little closer to God? As for the claim about hands going up everywhere, I do not in any way doubt that the absolute majority of the congregation considered themselves to be born-again Christians, but it is interesting how the pastor wanted us to think that a high number of people had been led to Jesus on that exact day, by inspiration or help of his sermon. The same procedure usually went for visiting guest speakers too, which along with Coleman’s observations indicate that this ‘technique’ is part of a larger Pentecostal tradition.

I would assume, though, unlike Coleman, that quite a few people do have their conversion stories from church. Ron, in the example opening this chapter, had a visual and audible experience with God but still says he was saved the day after, when his mother took him to church. I also spoke to other Pentecostals who told me they were saved during a church service or an organized prayer meeting. What my informants, then, referred to as ‘being

saved', was expressed relatively different in church and on the streets. While mostly the same words and prayers were used in church, as well as the same techniques where a leader said the words of the salvation prayer for either the crowd of worshippers or the individual on the streets to repeat, the conversions going on in church were not counted in the same ways individual conversions on the streets were. In the interpersonal meetings on the street, the proselytizer had the ability to ask her conversation partner about his beliefs and his past before any salvation ritual happened, an opportunity the Pastor in a large megachurch usually did not have.

The information given about what lies in getting saved did also vary. Being in church, especially for the first time, gave you a chance to experience the unity of the congregation. Being saved on the streets was more of an individual event, where the presence of others could even endanger the whole conversion; Joseph told me that they often met people, especially young men, who seemed interested in talking and even wanted to be saved, but said no if their friends were present. In church, you would usually get the 'package' of a band playing, people physically worshipping, atmospheric music and maybe most important of all; a motivational speech about religious life from a charismatic pastor.

The most elaborate conversion I observed on the streets still only included a short speech about God's love, closed eyes, prayer and hand-holding between the convert and one or two people from Providing Hope. All in all, what I would call salvation rituals in church during mass would usually be a collective experience that probably would not always count as 'the one' salvation, but rather a recurring event. Can it still be called salvation? In terms of making the one, life-altering decision to live with Jesus forever, producing the narrative a Pentecostal Christian will tell and retell throughout her life, what happens at the end of sermons in church might not qualify as salvation, but then we will have to rule out most street salvations as well. It looks like although salvation narratives for most Pentecostals focus strongly on one specific event, the act of being saved can for many be a process. And, as Simon Coleman points out, something that can be recreated through converting others (Coleman 2003, p. 17).

## **Can anyone be counted as saved?**

Although I could never know for sure as an observer, even a participating one – when faith is hard to quantify – I found it interesting that the conversions my informants claimed to have performed during events apparently lacked a demand for sincerity or any kind of knowledge

about the Christian denomination people were converting to. I saw this as especially evident in the work with converting three groups of people that we often encountered; small children, people heavily affected by drugs or alcohol and people obviously suffering from mental illnesses.

The one event where I was present at an overt conversion of children was a Saturday right before Easter. Providing Hope arranged a big Easter cookout in the local park for the neighborhood, and with the help of some of the men that lived in the Men's Home plus a rather large group of students visiting from G.R.A.C.E, a 'supernatural healing school' further up the coast, we held a barbecue and gave out clothes, toys and other much needed items in South Central Los Angeles. It was touching to see the happiness and enthusiasm that the local children showed in the games we arranged for them and for the gifts they were given. After a while, though, the students from the healing school had prepared a little play for the kids about how the devil had corrupted the world and how Jesus had resurrected and saved us all for eternity, if we only would accept his gift of salvation. Following this, the children were given balloons and asked to repeat the salvation prayer. The day after, at a prayer meeting, Pastor Lewis told some of the attendees that Providing Hope and G.R.A.C.E together had led ten children to God that day in the park. Some of the children were as young as three or four years old, and I found myself wondering how many more times they would be counted as saved in their lifetime. But converting children seemed common; Jeffrey, the live-in director of the Men's Home had done a lot of charity work in Mexico and told me that on one of his trips, he had managed to get over nine hundred children saved. Although I found it problematic that kids who clearly had no concept of different religions were counted, my informants seemed to agree that children are not born into salvation and must be converted individually. Thus, it is important to reach them as early as possible, because, as Pastor Lewis usually put it: "we can never know if we're gonna die tomorrow". I must admit that my discomfort with the salvation of children, the mentally ill and the heavily intoxicated was based on what I thought of as their inability to give informed consent, but I do realize that these conversions often had little or no consequences for the convert. What these events mainly contributed to, was raising the number of people my informants claimed to have converted.

Although it was obvious to me that the people counted as saved on almost every occasion was higher than the number of people who knew and genuinely felt they were saved in the sense of a life-altering experience, not everyone in Providing Hope were equally uncritical. Curtis was

an African-American in his forties who used to be a pimp before he was saved, and who now lived in the Men's Home and contributed to Providing Hope's work with great enthusiasm. Once, while we were handing out bags of food to the locals in South Central, Curtis asked almost every single person passing us by "can I just pray for you real' quick?". Most people accepted, and Curtis made them repeat the salvation prayer. "I'm on fire today!" he exclaimed between prayers. When we were packing up and getting ready to leave, Michael asked us how many people had been saved. "It's gotta be at least twenty", Curtis said, but in the car back with Joseph and me, Michael said that we could not just count every single person Curtis had talked to as saved, regardless of whether the words they had said corresponded with the salvation prayer. We filled out the form to be handed in to the Dream Center, and this is the only event I can think of where it was specifically stated that zero people had been saved.

## **Pentecostal expansion**

Extensive expansion throughout most of the world has been one of the key marks of Pentecostalism since it arose a little over a century ago (Kay, 2004). I do not doubt that the rapid growth Pentecostalism and Charismatic Christianities have seen over the last century is real, but seeing the way my informants counted converts makes it impossible not to be critical towards the accuracy of those numbers. As mentioned above, the 2011 Pew Report on global Christianity claim their numbers are «based in large part on figures provided by Christian organizations around the world» (Pew Report 2011, p. 17). In megachurches, the numbers that allow them to be defined as just that are always based on *attendance* and not membership (Thumma and Travis 2007, p. xix). It seems like being an officially registered member of a church is not an important part of being a Pentecostal Christian. Thus, organizations and churches *have to* make an estimate when asked about their congregation, and it is highly probable that these estimates are based on numbers of new converts, especially when these numbers are registered with almost every event.

Although my research only deals with a rather small group of Pentecostals in a limited geographical area and is not necessarily representative for Pentecostalism worldwide, this can say something about the ways in which new Pentecostals are registered. If the widespread idea that Pentecostalism is the fastest expanding Christian denomination in the world stems from a count of new converts done by overly eager evangelists with demands of saving as many as possible, it is unlikely that the numbers are correct. People might be counted several

times and also possibly by several different denominations. This could especially be true for the homeless population of Los Angeles, who encounter many different religious charity organizations.

It is also difficult to rule out the possibility that poor people in desperate situations will do much for basic help; although I never saw either Providing Hope or the Dream Center withhold food or even demand anything back in terms of conversation, praying or accepting salvation when they handed out alms to the needy, it is not unlikely that some of the people who received the food *thought so*. Saying yes to prayer or repeating a few words is easy, and even though I do not doubt that many of the homeless people were actual Christians – like the majority of Americans – I also think that some of them had learned their ways in the ‘charity economy’; there are clear power relations between giver and receiver, and often the receiver is expected to comply and be grateful. Starting a discussion about God’s existence is not always ‘worth it’ when all you want is some food to get through the day.

## **Worldwide evangelism**

The goal of worldwide evangelism and the strategies the Pentecostals used to get there were probably what I reacted to the most throughout my fieldwork. I have always found ‘pushing’ one’s religion on others problematic, especially on those that probably do not understand what they are saying yes to, like the aforementioned young children or people on drugs. Still, I came to understand how much living a life with Christ means to Pentecostals, and how much they want the same happiness for everyone else. Although it gives credit both in the eyes of fellow believers and presumably in the eyes of God to lead as many as possible to Him, I did also see in many evangelicals a genuine wish to give others a better life through the same route that they themselves had taken. As we saw in the example of Ron’s salvation story introducing this chapter, he was convinced that the voice of God saved his life. Thus, he used his narrative of both a troubled past and an amazing experience of God’s presence as a tool to convince others, me included. Although I was nowhere near starting to believe in God or getting saved during the course of my fieldwork, it did make an impression when Ron tried to convince me to convert by saying “I just want you to understand that we love you so much that we don’t want to see you suffer in Hell. We really, really just want you to come to Heaven with us”.

When Simon Coleman suggests that converting others might be a self-constitutive act for Charismatic Christians (Coleman 2003, p. 17), it underlines how intricate the relationship between what a conversion does for the converter and what it does for the converted is. Evangelizing is both fulfilling a perceived duty commanded by Jesus in the Bible (Matthew 28:19), a wish to share what is genuinely thought to be ‘a better life’, *and* way of being considered a good Christian. The additional ambitions and motivations behind recruiting others to Pentecostal faith are complicated, and I think that individual differences are important here. Not only in the three different ways of doing evangelism that Pastor Lewis, Ana and Michael represented, but also in most aspects of the performance of faith. Many of the Pentecostals I met were proud believers in all contexts, and used all and every chance to evangelize, like Ana did. Others, like Joseph and Michael, sometimes seemed uncomfortable with her direct approach and preferred a calmer way of teaching people about God. I saw people in church seemingly in a religious trance, singing and dancing and hardly noticing the world around them, while others spent most of the service playing games on their cell phones. People like Michael and Joseph dedicated their lives to unpaid charity work, while others went to church a few times a month and never engaged in social work. Although the Christians I studied had the basics of faith in common, the ways in which they practiced them were different.

## Summing up

I found it very interesting how the born-again Christians could have such different standards for their own conversion and the conversions of others. While the stories I heard of salvation, like Ron’s above, were tales of life-changing events, the salvations on the street were simple and sometimes not even noticeable, at least to me. The number of people that were said to be saved cannot have corresponded to the number of people who genuinely wanted to give their life to Jesus. I must admit I had trouble accepting these seemingly exaggerated numbers, especially when it came to children or mentally ill people in need. But, as I have come to understand – being counted does not actually harm anyone. Yes, it is worthy of critique if several of the ‘established facts’ of Pentecostalism – most importantly its growth – is based upon exaggerations, and especially when the number of converts is used to get financial donations, as will be discussed in chapter five. It was also saddening to see that ‘credit’ in the form of acknowledgement from church or organization leaders was given mostly to those who could present the largest number of converts. Yet again, there are worse ways to treat the



underprivileged than to count them. A Pentecostal's own conversion and his converting of others are complicated matters that work together in constituting the evangelical believer, along with several other characteristics of religious life. In the next chapter, I will move on to take a closer look at the performance of faith and religious practices, as well as discussing how my informants viewed the people they met on the streets.



# Chapter three: Performing Christianity

*All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit  
and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.*

*Acts 2:4.*

*Since the entire visiting team consists of girls, and since we are going out to explicitly target young women doing sex work, someone suggests that we girls pray together. It is late Friday night, and time for the weekly prostitute outreach in South Central. We always say a quick prayer before we go out, usually around a minute at the parking lot we meet at, or in the car on our way downtown. Tonight's visiting team seem eager about what they are about to take part in, and as the three men present are standing on the side, we women pray together. With me, a few girls from the Movement, Ana and the visiting team of 19-20-year olds from a university in Montana, we are probably ten or eleven women who are standing in a circle, holding hands. The role of prayer leader is taken by four different girls, successively. The first one, Allie from the Movement, thanks God for sending the team of girls to us and asks Him to protect us from harm. The second prayer leader, also a girl from the Movement, focuses on the girls we might meet out there; she shouts that we are going out into a war zone to save these girls, to tell them that they are valuable. As the prayers continue, the girl to my left squeezes my hand, hard. Both she and the girl on my other side are mumbling incoherent streams of words and sounds I cannot understand. I can see many of the other participants move their lips too, and the collective sound from the group almost drowns the voice of the one leading the prayer. Some phrases, like "yes, God" and "preach it!" are decipherable, but most of the other things being expressed is what I recognize as glossolalia, speaking in tongues. The girl leading the prayer speaks in a repetitive and almost lyrical tone, asking God to give the prostitutes we might meet their virginity back. As we finish the prayer, most of the participants look almost drained, but seem very happy. We get in our cars and drive downtown.*

## “A weird babel of tongues”

The use of glossolalia in prayer among my informants was highly dependent on context. The times, places and situations in which I experienced people speaking in tongues varied, but a certain pattern seemed to be followed. In this chapter, I want to discuss how both the use of glossolalia and of ‘common’ prayers in English was adjusted to fit the context they were used in, and also how these adjustments became components in presenting one’s faith to others. Looking at the charismatic gift of speaking in tongues, I will not attempt to explain how speaking in tongues work – what neurologically happens in the brain when a person speaks in tongues – or to go deeply into the linguistics of glossolalia. What I will rather try to do is understand why it appears where and when it appears, and just as importantly: how it is connected to conventional prayer. In addition, I want to look at how my informants prayed for, with and over people. How did prayer fit into the larger scheme of giving material and immaterial gifts to the unfortunate, and in which discursive logics did my informants place these marginalized people?

The word glossolalia is Greek and means “tongue speech”. Virginia H. Hine describes it like this: “it is a form of unintelligible vocalization which has non-semantic meaning to the speaker, and is interpreted in the Bible as a divinely inspired spiritual gift” (1969, p. 211). Known as one of the signature features of Pentecostalism, glossolalia plays a central role in the origin story of the movement. Simon Coleman describes how early Pentecostals by bringing the biblical practice of speaking in tongues – mentioned in the passage above, from Acts 2:4 – to the present, felt they were embodying “the beliefs and practices of an original, authentic Christianity” (Coleman 2000, p. 21). Coleman goes on to explain that “tongues were therefore an important indication of the reception of grace but also a form of subsequent empowerment” (2000, p. 21).

Among my informants, the practice of speaking in tongues did not seem to be a very central aspect of everyday worship. I never heard anyone mention it as a requirement or even a proof for being saved or born-again, nor did I notice any difference in status or position between those who were able to do it and those who never did. Unlike the spiritual gift of healing, which will be discussed in chapter four, the gift of speaking in tongues was not something my informants would frequently discuss or tell stories of. Furthermore, I never experienced any attempt or encouragement from one believer to another to interpret the glossolalia uttered. The ability to interpret tongue speaking is another spiritual gift listed in 1st Corinthians 12:8-

10. The same verse specifies that speaking in tongues and interpreting those tongues are two different gifts, and can very well be given to different people. In theory, a person who has received gifts of the Holy Spirit can be able to interpret tongues but not speak them, and vice versa according to the Bible.

Although glossolalia was neither discussed nor interpreted, it proved to be interesting in terms of how it reflected the adaptation of religious expressions to the public. Could it be that the use of tongues was more or less subconsciously adjusted after considering who was present? To an ‘outsider’, an unsaved listener or even someone who is curious about converting, seemingly random utterances of non-existing languages can be almost shocking and might make people skeptical about becoming a Pentecostal Christian. Later in this chapter, I will show how my informants consciously and subconsciously adapted their actions to their audience.

Many fields of research have been concerned with the study of glossolalia, among them linguistics, anthropology, neurology and psychology. According to William J. Samarin, “Psychopathological explanations for engaging in glossolalia have been so common that they are largely taken for granted” (1972, p. 123). Samarin claims that glossolalia has been treated as something abnormal, and that this fails to explain cultural factors (1972, p. 123). In his perspective, it does not matter what sounds exactly a person speaking in tongues makes – linguistically –, or what languages it might have similarities with. Once a Pentecostal speaks in tongues, she is a member of a Pentecostal subculture, and in this sense, there is no way of doing glossolalia right or wrong. It is of course interesting to see how one person’s tongue speaking appears very similar to another’s, but for Pentecostals, it is the fact that glossolalia appears that matters, not what it sounds like (Samarin 1972).

## **Learning to be a Pentecostal**

Some theoreticians argue that speaking in tongues is learned behavior. Although both Hine (1969) and Samarin (1968) claim to have recorded cases of individuals being able to speak in tongues without any previous knowledge of the phenomenon, Hine points out that most people start speaking in tongues in a religious context, or, as she puts it: “as part of a larger set of behavioral patterns and ideological formulations” (Hine 1969, p. 221). I would argue that this claim about speaking in tongues as learned behavior might also apply to prayer in general for my informants.

The Pentecostals I worked with in Los Angeles had several different ways of praying and worshipping God. There was collective prayer in church, meditative prayer walks as part of the rehabilitation programs, prayers asking for protection in what was perceived to be dangerous areas – like in the example above –, general prayers for people going through tough times; prayers for each other’s healing, families or general well-being, or for the salvation of non-Christians like me. What struck me relatively early, though, was how similar these prayers were in wording and structure. They did not seem fully scripted or preplanned, since the main theme of the prayer changed and was adapted to the context or to the requests of the person being prayed for, but the way the praying individuals addressed God and the way they complemented each other during the prayer was definitely comparable from one occasion to another.

Although I do not see the concrete linguistics in glossolalia as central to understanding the phenomenon of it, I would claim that language plays a central role in analyzing prayer practice. In her study of fundamentalist Baptists in Virginia, Susan F. Harding argues that “Bible-based language is the medium and the ritual practice through which born-again Christians are formed and reformed” (Harding 2000, p. x). While the special set of phrases that makes up an applied biblical language was central in both testimonies and in my informants’ communication with me and with each other, I would like to focus on the way this language was represented in prayer.

Discourse or talk in general, has been underemphasized in studies of religion, in favor of quantitative surveys, according to Wuthnow (2011). He argues that the qualitative techniques of interviewing and participant-observation are necessary to investigate lived religion, and that “What we say, how we say it, and what we accomplish through discourse are important aspects of what it means to be human and thus of relevance to the human sciences” (Wuthnow 2011, p. 15). In my research, I favored participant-observation over interviews, and I believe this choice provided me with more material to analyze prayer discourse. Praying, for my informants, was essential in most aspects of life, and the words and phrases I heard again and again said more about their relation to their faith than they themselves could have expressed in a formal interview, in my opinion. Discourse will also be a central term later in this chapter, when I analyze how my informants talked about people they met.

## Praying together and praying alone

The reason I would argue that praying can be learned behavior, is that despite individual differences, prayers followed a structure that was very similar for everyone I heard pray. In the beginning I had only heard people from the same organization – people that prayed together on a daily basis – pray, but after a while I noticed that many of the people we met on the streets led prayers in the same way. The word “just” was repeated; “Jesus, we just thank you and we just pray that you just hold your hand over us and that you just bless us”. The same biblical quotes, like “No weapons formed against you shall prosper” from Isaiah 54:17 (NKJV) appeared frequently. Another element was the interchangeability with which the names “God” and “Jesus” and to some degree “the Holy Spirit” were used: despite hard effort, I was not able to find any patterns in the use of either name. Both in their prayer and in their everyday conversations, my informants really did talk about the Holy Trinity as a trinity; three entities that were one and the same.

I do not believe that learning to pray ‘properly’ was something my informants consciously emphasized as part of converting, but rather that they subconsciously learned from each other when they prayed together. Although Ron in the empirical example opening chapter two said “I didn’t know how to pray, I had been a non-believer all my life!”, I got the impression that praying was very common in American society. President Obama and prominent public figures like Oprah Winfrey speak openly about their praying habits (Sharp 2012), and there have been extensive debates in the US about allowing prayer in public schools (Andryszewski, 1997). In a sense, anyone that wanted to could pray, and there was no right or wrong way to talk to God. This, in my opinion, also fits into the larger tendency of the *accessibility* of Pentecostal Christianity; as long as you wanted to and ‘felt ready’, as they said, there was nothing preventing you from converting. Becoming a Pentecostal was *supposed to* be easy, and so was praying.

If different situations called for different kinds of prayers, there were also different attitudes to praying. Ron, who frequently talked in alliterations and metaphors, was very insistent on getting enough time to pray, to “fill up his prayer tank”. When he prayed for people, he said, he used up his spiritual resources, and in order to be ‘recharged’, he had to spend a lot of time alone in his room at the Men’s Home, praying. Curtis, on the other hand, claimed that he was able to and that he certainly did pray anywhere; while cleaning, cooking, riding his bike or driving. To Ron, praying was an activity of its own, a resource he could gain and lose. There

was a clear distinction between praying for others, which weakened him, and praying alone, which strengthened him. For Curtis, prayer was equally as important as it was for Ron, but in no way did Curtis seem to distinguish between praying for others and praying for himself in terms of exhaustion. After praying over someone on the streets, Curtis would sometimes exclaim “I’m getting fire from this!”, indicating that praying with and for others strengthened him spiritually.

Draining or strengthening, praying over individuals was a central part of the outreach work my informants did. The central activities could be divided into three categories. One was giving out snacks or other food, which people sometimes said no thanks to or accepted to quickly walk away, another was converting people – which only ‘worked’ on a few, and the third was praying for or over someone. It was intriguing to see how almost everyone asked – nearly without exceptions – said yes to the question “can I pray for you?”. In all probability, not everyone asked could have been Christians and certainly not Pentecostals, but it seemed like prayer became an expression of *caring* from one person to another – most were happy someone would pray for them, regardless of the contents of the prayer. My informants would always ask for the recipients’ names, and sometimes whether they had any specific wishes or prayer requests. Most of the requests were about protecting families, finding a job or attaining money. None of the themes or prayer requests I heard – like asking God for money – were seen as too controversial, and whatever was asked was always mentioned in the prayer. With this practice, Christians out to proselytize were given some sort of authority that most people seemed to accept, regardless of whether the people themselves shared the Pentecostal worldview. These kinds of prayers open up to an analysis of the public and the private in Pentecostal praxis; what parts of faith and faith practices are considered personal and which are communal?

## **The public and the private**

Joseph O. Baker calls praying “the most private of religious practices” (2008, p. 169). I agree that praying can be highly personal, sometimes confidential and often conducted when alone, but since I do not pray myself, and since none of my informants except Ron and Curtis, with their differences mentioned above, talked about their personal prayers, public and semi-public praying was what I had access to. Praying for people on the streets was in my opinion an interesting mixture of public and private; while the topic of the prayer was someone’s



personal life and only a small group was present to hear the prayer, these were always conducted in public spaces. Not everyone specified the details of what they needed praying over, but I found people to be surprisingly open about their struggles and wishes.

According to a 1999 Gallup survey, nine out of ten of *all* Americans on average pray at least occasionally (Gallup and Lindsay 1999, p. 45). To this large segment of the population, meeting someone who offered praying with them was maybe perceived as a way of enforcing one's prayer, to speak with a stronger voice to God. There were also people who told us their prayer requests and then left us to pray for them when they were not present. The feeling of *being cared about*, knowing that someone wished you well was something I could relate to; despite not believing in a god myself, I did feel acknowledged and grateful when my informants told me they would pray for me.

It can of course be discussed what *kind* of public spaces the areas we mostly operated in were. Although anyone, in principle, had access to South Central Los Angeles, any travel guide or LA resident from other parts of the city would advise you to avoid 'the ghetto' after dark, stay in your car with locked doors or shun the area altogether. No one should walk anywhere alone, and certainly not women. The availability of the space to the public could be said to be dependent on so many factors that I doubt it can be characterized as a public sphere in the Habermasian sense (Habermas 1989). But neither were the South Central LA streets private, though, and I would argue that these semi-public prayers often reflected the semi-public and marginalized space they happened in. Sociodemographically, there is also a connection: according to Barker, "(...) women, African-Americans, and those with lower incomes pray more often than males, whites, and those with higher incomes" (2008, p.169). This corresponds well with the fact that South Central is a low-income, Black- and Hispanic-dominated neighborhood, and of course with the fact that homeless people are in most cases economically poor.

One could argue that the prayers led by pastors or speakers at the services in Angelus Temple megachurch were public or communal, but I would also call these prayers semi-public, albeit in a different way than the street prayers. Since stage prayers were mostly improvised by the speaker, the churchgoers could not participate with more than cheers, clapping and audible "amens". There were no well-known standardized prayers like *Our Father* or the Catholic *Ave Maria*. The content of the prayer was somewhat predictable, but this form of worship became a prayer *on behalf of* everyone present, not *from* everyone. Still, many combined these

sessions with their own more or less quiet prayers, and thus the personal content was mixed with the public initiative.

After one particular event, it became clear to me that my Pentecostal informants, too, distinguished between different forms of prayer, or rather between different *contexts* of prayer. Usually when I met people and explained to them that I was doing an anthropological study on Pentecostal Christianity and social work, and that I was not saved, they accepted it and seemed to understand, at least partially. Every week, I went to church with them and did various outreaches, Bible studies or other activities, and although we did discuss my lack of faith, they seemed to understand very well why I was there and that I was writing about them. One night, though, Angelus Temple arranged an overnight 12-hour prayer wake at the megachurch, and I went for a few hours. The event itself was mostly people sitting down or walking around mumbling prayers to themselves with a few short appearances on stage by church leaders saying prayers, but in the time I was there, I had three different informants – among them Joseph and Allie, whom I knew very well – come up to me and ask me if my attendance meant that I was finally saved. The next morning, when I arrived at the Men’s home for our Saturday outreach the ‘rumor’ that I had attended the prayer wake had reached the house, and I got several questions. I realized that this particular event was seen as something special *because* it was personal. They understood my method of observation, and despite the fact that they told me several times that I was in LA with them because God had a plan for me, they knew my main motive for going to church and doing outreaches was gathering empirical material for my thesis. I suspect that for them, going to an event promoting personal spiritual activities alone had to indicate something more in terms of me moving on their imagined road towards conversion.

## **Salvation and prayer as social phenomena**

Marcel Mauss argues that prayer is always a social phenomenon because of the social character of religion (2003, p. 33). He claims that “even when prayer is individual and free, even when the worshippers choose freely the time and mode of expression, what they say always uses a hallowed language and deals with hallowed things, that is, ones endorsed by social tradition” (Mauss 2003, p. 33). This brings us back to the discussion of praying as a learned experience: although Pentecostal doctrine explicitly focuses on a direct and personal relationship with Jesus, this personal relationship is shaped by what one has been taught, both

by being part of a church or a religious community, but also, I assume, by living in the highly religious society the US must be said to be.

Still, as Mauss goes on, seeing prayer as a social phenomenon does not mean it is not an individual one (2003, p.36). Society, religion and prayers would not exist without the individuals that live within them. Mauss wishes to turn around the notion that individual prayer is the principle behind collective prayer; for him, the opposite is true (2003, p. 36). Maybe, then, if *how* to perform religion is something a believer learns from the collective, *when* to perform religion could also be something a believer learns?

Going momentarily back to glossolalia, it would not be controversial to say that such a phenomenon might seem strange to outsiders. “Unintelligible vocalization”, as Hine describes it (1969, p. 211), often performed in something resembling a religious trance can be exotic and exciting to those who have never experienced it before, but it also has the potential to turn away possible converts. And this is an important point: the occasions on which I experienced someone speaking in tongues, never seemed arbitrary. While glossolalia for my informants was fairly common in prayers, it *never* occurred in any prayers on stage in church. Or, to put it another way; tongues were not spoken into a microphone. Samarin also makes a point out of this; “Among neo-Pentecostals this is the most common use; indeed, most people engage in glossolalia only for prayer. Moreover, they use it in private or only in intimate (that is, nonpublic) settings” (Samarin 1972, p. 125).

As mentioned above, prayers played a central role at the services in Angelus Temple megachurch. It was obvious that the services in church were used to introduce new members, but also non-converted and curious people to the church, in addition to serving those who were already converted. Special seats close to the stage were reserved for those who had never attended a service before, and newcomers were welcomed both personally by a church volunteer before the service and by the speaker during the service. Keeping church attendance up was most likely a top priority, both because of economical offerings and because having a large congregation entitled Angelus Temple to call itself a megachurch (Thumma and Travis 2007) as well as giving Pastor Matthew Barnett more ‘leverage’ when he travelled around the country speaking and raising some of the estimated \$550 000 that according to the Dream Center guide was required monthly to run the Center. In addition to providing a youthful service with a rock band playing – what Thumma and Bird refer to as a ‘contemporary worship style’ (2008, p. 2) – and charismatic speakers giving motivational speeches that

appealed to many, church attendance was kept up by bussing in both homeless people from the skid row area and underprivileged youth from housing projects around Los Angeles to church, promising them pizza on the way home if they stayed for the entire service.

In a fairly ‘mainstream’ setting like this, glossolalia – as maybe one of the least available parts of Pentecostal practice – could potentially have been something that turned newcomers away, an undesired consequence. It was not about being embarrassed about aspects of your faith or religious practices, but rather about adapting the presentation of a lifestyle you wanted your audience to embrace. When my informants met people that were not saved, they had a different approach and a different way of performing religion than they had when they were with only fellow Pentecostals. I also noticed this adaptation in their relations to me; it took months before I heard anyone speak in tongues openly when I was present. I do not know whether this was because my informants had ‘given up’ trying to save me and felt they could be themselves again, or if I had spent so much time with them that they did not consider me an outsider anymore, regardless of my lack of faith. Neither do I know how conscious these restrictions my informants seemed to put on themselves were; it is possible that ‘holding back’ or adapting their religious practices was not a choice every individual believer had thought too much about. If individual prayer, as Mauss claims (2003), is derived from collective prayer, individual evangelization strategies could be something inspired both by the expression faith was given in church and the way the Pentecostals themselves once had been saved. But, just like praying as learned practice can be subconscious, so could evangelization strategies. Still, I do believe the adaptations made *in church* can have been part of a larger goal to make as many people as possible come to church, recommend it to others and return the next week.

It is important to mention, though, that as in almost everything else concerning Charismatic religion, individual differences were always at play. Few of the things I have discussed above were absolutes for everyone, and even though there were clear patterns in both praying and evangelizing work, different people had different approaches to both. Ana, whose salvation story and strategy was discussed in chapter two, told everyone she met that Jesus loved them, regardless of the setting and the position of the listener. Others, like Pastor Lewis, focused on telling people to be an obedient servant to the Lord, and to avoid Hell at all costs as an evangelizing strategy. The overall impression I got of the way my informants presented their lives as believers to possible converts, however, was a message of love, forgiveness and eternal life. There was very little talk about what one had to give up in order to be saved. In

the following, I would like to discuss how my informants viewed these possible converts on the streets, most of them homeless people, sex workers and other underprivileged groups, and to continue using the term *adaptation* to analyze how evangelizing and social work was combined.

## Attempting to explain homelessness

In *Hobos, Hustlers and Backsliders*, an “ethnographic discourse analysis” (p. xx) about homelessness in San Francisco and homeless *men* specifically, Teresa Gowan presents three different discursive logics for explaining homelessness (Gowan 2010). With *sick talk*, homelessness is explained as pathology, a result of some form of disease or condition, usually an addiction to alcohol or narcotics. Another category is *system talk* – those who blame the system for their misery. Factors like discrimination, gentrification and lack of adequate social services are given as the reasons these people have fallen outside society. The last discursive logic is what Gowan calls *sin talk* – where homelessness is seen as a moral offense (Gowan 2010 p. xxi). By the homeless themselves, their situation is within this last discourse often presented as a choice or an ‘orientation’ towards the street. In what Gowan calls the moral construction of poverty, though, she dates this *sin talk* back to Protestant Europe around 1500, where poverty was explained as a result of a character defect (2010, p. 28). This way of thinking, Gowan argues, is still prevalent in US society, and makes the system prone to *punish* the homeless, either by ‘cleaning the streets’, relocating the homeless to marginal areas, or by confining them (Gowan 2010, p. 29).

I will not attempt to give a strict definition of the term ‘homeless’, but it is important to remember that this category consists of more than what I would call the *visibly* homeless; people who carry all their belongings with them, who often look like they have been outside for a long time without access to basic hygiene articles, toilets or showers and who sleep on the streets – sometimes during the day to decrease the risk of being attacked while sleeping. Visibly homeless people can be seen all over Los Angeles. An overwhelming amount of the visibly homeless stay around skid row, where most of the organizations helping the homeless are located. Still, there were also people living on the streets in richer areas like Beverly Hills or in Brentwood, where I lived. Many of those who are without a permanent place to live, however, do not necessarily appear homeless. Some live with friends or family, others live in temporary housing such as shelters, hostels or motels. Living in motels is often common for

families that have become homeless because of the economic recession that has been significantly affecting US society since 2008. In addition to currently homeless people, those who have had homelessness experiences in the past also have interesting things to say about homelessness, and may also still be affected by it. For instance, one man we talked to on skid row had lived outside for twenty years, and when he finally got a place to live he felt trapped by the walls of the apartment. He now managed to sleep there at night, but spent his days outside on the streets. Visible or not – homelessness seems to be a large and increasing problem in the United States.

Without going through the entire history of homelessness in America, I would like to highlight one interesting aspect; Teresa Gowan mentions how Kevin Starr in his book *Endangered Dreams* describes the conditions of the increasing homeless population in California in the 1930s, after the Wall Street crash when rumors of jobs in agriculture brought many unemployed men to the state; “The Los Angeles police department, for example, would regularly sweep skid row neighborhoods and book every vagrant for thirty days inside” (Starr 1996 p. 227-228). The interesting thing about this quote is that this, in my experience, reflects the way homeless people are *still* treated in Los Angeles, more than 80 years later. In the spring months, whenever we went to Venice Beach to give out sandwiches to the people who lived on the beaches, there were always long lines and all the food we had was gone within twenty minutes. Towards the summer, though, we often had leftover food, and there were significantly fewer people coming over. Although the number of people frequenting Venice Beach in general was higher, the homeless population was lower. Both Joseph and a homeless man we spoke to told me the reason for this; there had been a swipe. A swipe was when the police – mostly because tourist season was approaching – came to parts of town with a high homeless population that were also tourist destinations, like Venice or Hollywood, and either drove the homeless to areas without tourists or arrested them for minor misconducts. Technically, things like sleeping outdoors, carrying an open container of alcohol and crossing the street on a red light are illegal in LA, but these laws are usually only enforced on the homeless. It was disturbing to see things like the weekly street cleaning in some regions; this was really a term for when the Street Maintenance Division washed the sidewalks and roads, but in certain places ‘street cleaning’ came to mean removing people who lived on the streets. Either way, the methods used to ‘control’ the visibly homeless population in LA could often be said to be inhuman (Davis, 1992).

As mentioned, the visibly homeless men and women were what the volunteers in Providing Hope meant when they talked about “feeding the homeless”. For reasons explained in chapter one, I did not spend enough time with or talk enough to any of the homeless men or women we met to say much about how they viewed themselves. In addition, many of them were suffering from mental illnesses or they were very intoxicated, and it was hard to get much out of what they were saying. What I do have extensive data on, though, is how the volunteers in Providing Hope *talked about* the homeless.

## **Pentecostal discourses on homelessness**

Touching briefly in on discourse analysis (Foucault 1999), I would say that I could recognize all three of Teresa Gowan’s homelessness logics in the way my informants talked about homeless people. *Sick talk* was central – since some of my informants had been addicted to various substances themselves, before they were saved, they seemed to have a profound understanding of how addiction can often destroy a life. They never judged anyone or turned them away because they were under the influence of drugs and alcohol. If there was anything problematic in the relation between God and an intoxicated person, it was usually pointed out by the intoxicated person themselves, and not the Christian. We met more than one homeless man who asked us to pray for him after he had left, because he did not want to talk to God when he was drunk.

It should perhaps also be mentioned that the graduation rate at the Discipleship, the Dream Center’s rehabilitation program, was merely 23 %. The guide who explained this as he showed me and a few others around the Center also said that although it sounded like an unsuccessful program when almost four out of five dropped out, the 23% rate was higher than the national average of people graduating a rehabilitation program. As far as he explained, the program consisted of strict discipline, extensive prayer, manual labor, and one of the main graduation criteria; learning long passages from the Bible by heart. Participants were not allowed to sustain any relationships with people from ‘the outside’ other than marriage, and for most of the 12, 14 or 16 months the program lasted, they were not allowed to leave the Dream Center campus other than to go to church. Of course, graduating the program was no guarantee for staying straight: Allie once told me about a man who had recovered from pill abuse through the Discipleship program, but when he had back surgery a few months later, he was put on heavy pain medication and fell back into his addiction. The point is that my

informants did not blame people for being unable to fight their addiction – although some of them themselves had gotten out of it, they acknowledged the fact that recovering can be extremely hard, even “with God’s help”.

What Gowan calls *sin talk* was only partially used as an explanation, not by saying that homeless people had themselves to blame for their situation, but by discussing the possibility that someone might actually have more or less chosen to live on the streets. When discussing the frequent attempts by the police to ‘clean up’ skid row, Michael and Joseph explained to me that doing so would be impossible – people would always come back. Partially, this was because of the easy access to drugs, but Joseph also mentioned how the freedom from constraints such as bills, paying rent and having to stay in the same place tempted many. Going into rehabilitation would also mean, as Michael put it, “going from almost unlimited freedom to none”. My informants did not see homelessness as a moral offense, but did acknowledge that the homeless were not all defenseless victims.

*System talk* was also present in the homelessness discourse my informants operated within. They did not talk much about the state, federal resources or the way social benefits were distributed, and they listened to my accounts of the Norwegian social democracy and the welfare state with a certain curiosity – free healthcare sounded great, they said, but some asked me why anyone bothered to work at all in my home country when they could be provided for by the state. The limited American social system that could be said to keep people alive, but that often failed to provide them with even the most basic life necessities, seemed to be a reality to my informants – a way things worked, not something they could see as organized in any other way. As explained in chapter one, with the Faith-Based Initiative many Americans see social work as a task for (preferably Christian) charity organizations like Providing Hope, and not necessarily the state.

A part of the system my informants were skeptical towards, though, was the police. Joseph often talked about how it was better to avoid any contact with them, but this was partially because he had been in prison and sometimes was wrongfully arrested because of the way he dressed or the places he frequented. It was not only Joseph that shunned the police, though, on one occasion a police car was parked outside the liquor store we used to set up our table outside every Friday, and we all agreed to drive by and find another location, to avoid getting involved in something. The negativity towards the police did not only involve avoiding them, though; Providing Hope also refused to acknowledge the police’s role in reducing the number



of prostitutes in a particular area. Although there was probably a multitude of reasons why most of the girls were gone compared to a few years earlier, it seemed relatively obvious to me the sex workers chose to relocate to other areas when the police used undercover strategies; selling sexual favors is illegal in California as in most other American states, and police officers would drive up to girls pretending to be costumers, to then arrest them. My informants, though, and especially Pastor Lewis, were convinced that the decrease in prostitution in the area was due to Providing Hope's presence. To put it simply; their conclusion was that since they had talked to both the girls and their pimps about God, they had to have disappeared because they were saved and thereby led out of prostitution by a higher power.

In addition to these three ways of explaining both homelessness and other ways of ending up in a position on 'the outskirts of society', my informants had a fourth: Satan. To them, the threat of evil was ever-present, and anything bad or undesirable could in theory be explained with an 'evil force' that had the ability to affect anyone. With this explanation, no one could truly be to blame for anything; it seemed that people could not be evil, weak or bad; they could only be affected by Satan. Not even those who were saved could escape this; when the other residents at the Men's Home were annoyed with Ron for neglecting to help out with the outreaches and the domestic work, they explained it with Satan trying to control him. One of Ana's favorite sayings was "Greater is he who is in you than he who is in the world", taken from 1. John 4:4, indicating that the potential for evil was ever present.

## **Others?**

In *Moral Ambitions* Omri Elisha describes the way his suburban, mostly white evangelist informants held prejudices towards the people they were centering their social outreach towards – often both “cultural strangers and racial others” (Elisha 2011, p. 155). After federal welfare in America was dismantled in the 1990s, what George W. Bush called “armies of compassion” (Elisha 2011, p. 153), namely the Faith-Based Initiative presented in chapter one, were to take over, at the same time downsizing the government's role. For religious conservatives, this fit well with principles of biblical compassion, but also with neoliberal and neoconservative ideas of personal responsibility, according to Elisha (2010, p. 156). In a way, the privatization of charity had enabled religious organizations – mostly Christian – to decide to a certain degree who were deserving recipients of welfare. Teresa Gowan also talks about

this; how there is a distinction in American society between “the deserving and undeserving poor” (Gowan 2010, p. 33), a notion that can be connected to the idea of ‘the American dream’; if you succeed it is by your own merits and if you fail it is your own fault. I suspect this view might be about to change now, though; when homelessness, especially among families, has become so common the majority knows someone who is affected, the general view of the reasons behind it may become different. The national increase in homeless families was a frequent topic in media while I was living in California.

I would not say I saw the same otherness in the relations between my Christian social worker informants and their recipients as Elisha did. Although the majority of both the attendees at Angelus Temple and the volunteers in Providing Hope were white, and most of the people they reached out to were not, there were no striking differences and no overt talk of race or ethnicity. Neither was there the same discrepancy in class, at least not for the volunteers in Providing Hope. As will be elaborated on later, several of them had backgrounds very similar to the people they met. One would maybe think that the political conservatism often associated with evangelical Christians in the United States would cause my informants to think that marginalized people had themselves to blame for their situation, fitting into what Gowan calls *sin talk*, but this did not seem to be the case. In passing comments, some of them expressed typical fundamentalist views like “not agreeing with the homosexual lifestyle” and opposing abortions, and I found this to be especially visible in the terms they used; for instance, a ministry for poor, one-parent households was called a ministry for ‘unwed mothers’, as if the state of not being married itself would be an indicator for needing help. Unlike many fundamentalist Christians in the US, though, my informants did not use much energy on issues like these. Providing people with help in the form of food and the gospel was far more important than judging them.

## Summing up

Looking at the bigger picture and at why so many people convert to Pentecostalism, I think this chapter can say something about the situation of many of those who convert, or even ‘convert’, if my observations in chapter two are right. When federal decisions like the Faith-Based Initiative – which makes the core of social responsibility religious – is combined with hard-lived realities and with smaller initiatives like Angelus Temple’s ‘trading’ of church attendance for pizza, turning to religion becomes a way of adapting to the way things work,

even possibly a strategy for surviving. I still think that most of the homeless or underprivileged population is already religious, and I would also like to say that the reasons they keep their faith when their situation never seems to better is an interesting discussion that I do not have room for here. Still, the way prayers, blessings and help from Christian organizations is present in the everyday lives of the marginalized, *not* being a Christian becomes a radical and unusual choice. Of course, factors like upbringing and previous experiences contribute to the religiosity of the people we met in our outreach work, but both the way my informants adapted their message to their audience and the way things are organized in the US are important factors in explaining why Pentecostalism has spread, at least in this part of the population.

What I also think has become apparent throughout this chapter is that my informants knew their audience. Even though their adaptations, their decision whether to use glossolalia or not or how and when to pray could have been partially subconscious, the experiences they had with evangelizing and charity work worked together with the experiences they had from their past lives in shaping how they approached, fed, saved, talked to and talked *about* the usually marginalized people they met.



# Chapter four: Healing and the act of giving – serving God in American megachurches

*"I am the Lord that heals you."*

Exodus 15:26.

*The living room of the combined Men's Home and Community Center that Providing Hope operates in South Central LA is crowded. It is Sunday night, and in place of the usual Bible Study, a visiting team of young students from G.R.A.C.E Supernatural School are organizing what they call a 'healing crusade'. The room is filled up with the students, Pastor Lewis and some old friends of his, the volunteers in Providing Hope and a few people from the neighborhood. Two of the students enter the center of the room and start playing guitar and singing. The lyrics are simple and repetitive, and soon most of the room joins in on the singing. Several students walk over to Pastor Lewis and lay their hands on his head, praying for his healing as well as singing along to the lyrics. One of Pastor Lewis's old friends starts shouting over the music, praising God and speaking in tongues with closed eyes. Some of the attendees fall to their knees in prayer as the music escalates. As the song ends, Tina, the leader of the student delegation announces that it is time for healing testimonies. One of the students, a British girl of around twenty, tells a story of her father, who had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease a few years ago. The doctors had told them he only had a few more years to live, but the family never lost hope, and kept praying for their father's recovery. It was not until they had contacted a famous TV pastor and religious writer who had helped them pray, that things had turned. Her father was now completely free of Alzheimer's, and was expected to live on for many years. The girl is crying while telling her story, and the audience, too, is clearly moved. Three more students come up to give the testimonies of how they have been healed through the power of the Lord. Tina proclaims that the time has come for them to heal each other, and with the help of one of her students, she starts calling out different kinds of hurts people may have. The first thing called out is back pain, and a woman from the neighborhood raises her hand. Five or six of the students walk over to her and place*

*their hands on her back. One of the girls tells the pain to be “gone in the name of Jesus”, and Tina asks the woman if she feels better, to which the woman nods. Tina goes on to ask if there is anything the woman used to not be able to do because of her back pain, and the woman says that bending her knees used to be hard. Tina asks her to do this now, and the audience cheers her on. She is able to bend her knees a little, but when Tina enthusiastically asks “It’s better, right? It’s better?”, the woman mumbles that it is, but it still hurts a little. Still, Tina turns to the people present and proclaims: “Look at that! Years and years of pain gone in the blink of an eye through the power of God!”. The praying and the praise escalate, and the rest of the night is spent saying prophecies over each other, singing, praying and speaking in tongues. One of the students comes over to me and hands me a beautiful silver necklace in the shape of a cross; it is very special to her, but God told her to give it to me so I can use it in the future when I finally get saved.*

## **Stories of supernatural healing**

The belief that anyone that receives the ‘gift of salvation’ and give their lives to Jesus will also receive spiritual gifts, or charismata, is a central one in Pentecostalism (Kay 2011). The ability to supernaturally heal others is one of these spiritual gifts, as stated in 1. Corinthians 12:9. During the course of my fieldwork, I witnessed several attempts by my informants to heal others, and I also heard numerous stories of how they had healed someone, or how they had been healed themselves. In this chapter, I will discuss the concept of healing as a spiritual gift, a practice and an element in negotiating biblical knowledge. I will also use Mauss (1990) to look at how healing can be seen as a gift – both from Jesus to a believer, and from one believer to another – and compare this to the other gifts evangelizing Christians mean to give – the abstract gift of salvation and the concrete material gifts of food and clothes. In this, I will use theories of gift-giving and reciprocity to highlight how the concept of giving is important to Pentecostal charity workers.

According to William K. Kay, the concept of spiritual healing of the body in Pentecostalism rests upon the belief that if Jesus can forgive all your sins as a result of his death on the cross, He can heal your body too (2011, p. 14). The ability to heal others is something all Pentecostals can achieve, but no one can heal everyone (Kay 2011). This aspect of being a Christian seemed to be very important to some of my informants, while others hardly mentioned it. Personal accounts of “feeling a little better” – like the woman with back pain in

the example above – was the closest thing I experienced to actual physical healings of the body, but I heard many stories of what *I* would have thought of as impossible healings. As discussed in chapter two, testimonies of God’s work was an important part of being a Pentecostal and like narratives of salvation, stories of supernatural healing were often recounted through testimonies.

Often, the stories were presented as a chronological narrative, like the example of the British girl’s story above. Someone was sick, he was prayed for and in the end he got well. Other times, the healing stories were mentioned in passing, presenting it almost like an everyday experience. Ana, the “true evangelist” Filipino woman that came out with us on Fridays and that was eager to convert me, often said things like “Did I tell you about that woman with cancer that I healed?”. She also claimed to have healed people over the phone. For some, it was not uncommon to take credit for the healing and say “I healed”, while others always made sure to underline that ultimately, everything good they did was really God’s work. I once told Allie that I thought they were doing a good job with feeding the homeless, and she looked straight at me and said “It’s not us doing it. I just want you to know that”. All types of healing and miracles were accounted for without any critical questioning, at least that I ever heard of; Pastor Lewis once told us he had witnessed people rising from the dead, and he received nothing but praise from his audience.

According to Candy Gunther Brown, a large majority of Pentecostals claim to have personal experience with divine healing (Brown 2011). Non-Pentecostals also seem highly open to the phenomenon; some surveys claim that as much as 70-80 % of the *total* US population believes in divine healing (Brown 2004). For many converts, healing in various forms seems to be a central aspect in their salvation narratives – like Ana who had been sick for 20 years before she was saved – and in the same process healed. She never specified what exactly her illness had consisted of, but she made sure to underline that it was gone in an instant with her salvation.

In more ways than one, the discourse and methods of divine Pentecostal healing are similar to those of non-Christian spiritual or paranormal healers like new age-mediums and people that claim to be in touch with the dead, to have ‘warm hands’ or being able to ‘read auras’. There is of course a difference between believing in alternative medicine and believing in the paranormal, but I would argue both belong to the same unconventional and alternative belief system, often characterized as superstitious. As Baker and Draper (2010) show, the

relationship between the unconventional paranormal realm and the more accepted religious supernatural realm of belief has been viewed incompatible by some, but as opening up to one another for others (Baker and Draper 2010, p.413). Both in the healing and in the prophecies some of the Pentecostals gave, I noticed a few of the same strategies often seen in practices categorized under alternative medicine. When prophesizing over someone, making remarks that were obvious or very general was common, like the girl who said to me The Holy Spirit had told her I liked to listen to music. I also believe that the placebo effect played just as big a role in the religious spiritual healings I heard of as it is believed to do in other, ‘alternative’ types of supernatural healing. My informants, though, would most certainly strongly object to this comparison. They saw any claims of supernatural actions or effects that were not the work of God as demonic, frequently mentioning how even practices like readings in Tarot cards were dangerous. In their view, the holy trinity of God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit was the only one able to heal and give prophecies. Following this view, though, the “I healed”-claims were more likely slips of the tongue or ways of speaking, and not actual beliefs that they alone had the ability to heal others without the help of God.

## **Spiritual beliefs**

Healing of physical pain or diseases was usually the first association people seemed to connect to the use of the term ‘healing’. Still, I got the impression that healing to my informants meant more than just curing the body. Spiritual healing was spiritual in the sense that it came from a spiritual, abstract and non-human place and from the Holy Spirit, but also in the sense that it could heal people’s spirit or soul. The term is interesting, because it was so widely used by my informants. When opening a conversation with possible converts, they would rarely ask “Do you believe in God?”, but rather say “Do you have any spiritual beliefs?”. I assume the Pentecostals included all religions as well as new age and ‘alternative’ beliefs in this question – even practices they themselves viewed as demonic. It was clear that when they spoke about ‘the spirit’ among themselves, they meant the Holy Spirit – a part of the holy trinity, and in effect the same as God or Jesus. Still, the word spiritual meant so much more when communicating with those who were potentially unsaved. One could also argue that the term ‘spiritual belief’ – since they avoided the use of the word religion – became a substitute. Religion was – according to several of my informants – all the bad things that came between God and the believers, but one still needed a collective term for theism.



## A positive discourse

The point of this chapter is not to find out whether or not individuals were ‘really’ healed, or exactly how diseases had been cured. Instead, I wish to discuss the processes that surround narratives of spiritual healing and how both results *and* the lack of them were negotiated and justified. First of all, no one told stories of unsuccessful healings. I never heard any accounts of prayers that had no effect or people that died or got sicker *because* no one were able to heal them. The fact that only success stories were presented made the healing discourse entirely positive, and most likely easier to believe in. This positive discourse could also be an important element in trying to explain the spread of Pentecostalism – a faith that promises to heal you and even give you the power to heal others must seem attractive, especially for those who feel they have been ‘given up’ by conventional medicine, or to those that cannot afford health insurances and thus has limited access to conventional health services – a common problem in America.

It was not only the results of healing and prayers that were negotiated by my informants; I had the feeling that most aspect in life were talked about in a way that made it fit into the plan they believed God had for them. The way their faith was affecting their actions while at the same time working as a tool for explaining unexpected happenings often fascinated me. When *everything* became a result of the will of either God or Satan, explaining neither unfortunate events nor ‘miracles’ became difficult. The first time I really saw this come into play, was a late Friday night early in my fieldwork. We were doing an outreach outside a liquor store in South Central LA, giving away candy and reading material while talking to the patrons. When we got back to the van to leave the area around 2 am, it turned out that someone had opened the hood of the car and stolen the car battery. The first reaction was something along the lines of “We shouldn’t have parked on a side street” and “Well, this is a pretty bad area”, but the second – and almost as immediate – response was to thank God for the trial and for putting us in a situation that we could learn something from. Within a minute, a very unfortunate situation had been turned into a positive act of God.

When we see that situations like this so easily could be transformed and adapted, it is easier to understand how spiritual healing was explained and justified. If someone were to be miraculously healed, it would serve as a proof of God’s omnipotent power and excellence, but if illnesses failed to be cured, this could either mean that God wanted it to be so and that He teaches through suffering, or more often; it could be interpreted as a challenge from God to

keep praying, to pray even harder and to never lose faith. Although charismatic Pentecostal healing was sometimes described as immediate by my informants, many of the stories I heard were of a different kind; the healings were sudden, but they appeared after a long period of praying, sometimes even years. It is likely that hearing narratives of healings that happened after continuous prayer would inspire believers to keep praying rather than giving up. And, if praying had been involved in the process towards a person getting well, the credit could always be given to God, no matter how many other means that were used in the curing.

Understanding the phenomenon of spiritual healing was difficult for me, and I often found myself thinking “I wonder what *really* happened?”. As mentioned, I am not trying to deconstruct stories that people believed very strongly in, or to make fun of them, but I do feel it is important to mention where I stand in this. I was curious to know more about the story with the girl and her father in the example above, but her narrative seemed so well-rehearsed, so established, that there was nothing more to tell, much like the conversion narratives presented in chapter two. Although there is no known cure for Alzheimer’s disease in conventional medicine, her story did not seem to impress the listeners any more than any other story about the curing of an illness would. Narratives about overcoming cancer – an often treatable condition – were received in the same manner; with praise of God. The same was the case with a testimony I heard in church; a woman just enrolled in the Discipleship rehabilitation program told the congregation that she had been diagnosed with HIV right before coming to the Dream Center, but now that she was saved, her HIV was gone and she was completely healed. Although this would probably have been one of the world’s first recorded cases of HIV being cured, people’s clapping and cheering was no different from when the same woman said that God had helped her overcome her alcoholism. It seems like the belief in God’s power to heal was so strong that the knowledge of what is considered curable and incurable in conventional medicine did not matter, and episodes of healing were not rated by how ‘impressive’ they were.

## **“Grow out!”**

The episode that first made me *really* understand how powerful my informants’ belief in divine healing was became eye-opening to me in more ways than one. As part of the usual Saturday outreach event organized by the Dream Center, we were probably around twenty-five people who had gone to skid row together. About half of us were people from the Center

who had mostly been out there before, and the other half a group of girls visiting from a university in Arkansas. After giving out food and water, walking around talking to and praying with some of the many homeless people that reside in the area, it was time to get back to our buses. As we stood on the sidewalk waiting, Laney, one of the girls from Arkansas, asked us if we wanted to join in on a healing prayer for Brooke, another one of the girls present. Brooke explained to us that about twelve years ago, when she was six, she had been in an ice skating accident and the tip of her index finger was cut off. She held her hand up for us to see, and the index finger of her right hand was visibly shorter than the other fingers, and had a faint scar on top of it. Brooke went on to tell us that she wanted to ask God for the finger to be healed, not because she was vain about it, but because she was giving God a chance to show His divine power by making her severed finger grow back out. We all held hands as Laney prayed:

*“Father God, we pray so hard, we ask you to use your divine power, father God, to make Brooke’s finger grow out! Just like Joshua stopped the sun on the day of battle in the Bible, he pointed at it and said ‘Sun! Stop!’, like this we pray directly to the finger, we are telling the finger: grow out!”*

This part of Laney’s prayer is taken from my memory and is probably not correct word for word, but I wrote it down shortly after I had heard it. Seeing how everyone present fully seemed to believe that Brooke’s limb would grow back out brought me closer to understanding the dynamics of religious belief in spiritual healing. Just like in the examples with the Alzheimer’s and the HIV above, there are no cases of a human limb re-growing after 12 years ever recorded in conventional medical history as far as I was able to find, but this fact did not seem to have any effect on the intensity with which these girls prayed and believed.

## **Under-communicated cooperation**

If conventional medicine was used in addition to prayers in the healing stories I heard, this would usually be downplayed or not mentioned at all. Although I have no way of knowing the full extent of all the healing narratives, I have reason to believe that conventional medicine often was involved when it came to serious illnesses. The leader of Providing Hope, Pastor Lewis, was sick during the last part of my stay in Los Angeles. He was well-functioning and could mostly go on with his daily activities, but he needed surgery to remove a tumor that

affected his hearing, and he had a successful operation just before I left LA. The fact that Pastor Lewis turned to conventional medicine to cure his fairly serious condition, did not in any way seem to contradict the belief my informants all had in spiritual healing. There was never any talk about “letting God deal with it” or “praying it away” as far as I heard. It simply did not seem like healing through a divine power and healing through conventional medicine were contradictions or that they challenged each other in any way. Rather, these two approaches to curing an illness were working together, completing each other. When learning that Pastor Lewis was sick, the frequency and the intensity in the prayers for him increased, and it was not only his healing directly that was prayed for; for instance, God was asked to support the surgeons performing the operation and help them do a good job.

In the beginning, and especially after the episode with the prayer for Brooke’s finger to grow out, I was curious about the way Pentecostals trusted God in everything; could it potentially be damaging to them if they believed so strongly in God’s power to heal that they avoided seeking help from doctors when they were ill? It turned out that this was not the case, at least with Pastor Lewis’s illness. The seemingly well-functioning cooperation between spiritual and conventional healthcare has not always been the case in Pentecostalism, though. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, in one of the movements that can be said to be the early stages of Pentecostalism, or at least to have inspired the movement, theologian John Alexander Dowie planned an isolated city for Christians in the Chicago area around the year 1900. Named Zion, the city would be without things like tobacco and dance halls, but also lacking doctors, hospitals and medicine. Dowie was a complete dualist, and in his eyes, no one who believed in God should have anything to do with medicine (Kay, 2011).

Interestingly enough, Pastor Matthew Barnett of the Dream Center and Angelus Temple also had a case of serious illness during my fieldwork. With him being a busy pastor of a large megachurch and a highly public person, I never personally spoke to Pastor Barnett; neither did I make any effort to do so. I chose to focus on Providing Hope, and in addition use data from services and outreaches with the Dream Center to supplement my knowledge about Pentecostal Christianity. Although I never directly met Pastor Barnett, he himself was very personal in the services he gave in church. In March, Matthew’s wife Caroline, herself an ordained pastor, held the regular Sunday service because Matthew was in the hospital with a Polinary Embolism. Despite the serious condition Matthew recovered fairly quickly, and already the next Sunday he was back in church to talk about his experience. I sat through both

of the Sunday services, and heard his speech entitled “lessons learned from the hardest week of my life” twice.

In the service, Pastor Barnett explained some of the events leading up to his hospitalization, and it was interesting to see how he – just like those in the examples mentioned above – interpreted what had happened to be a part of God’s plan for him. He talked about how he had been playing a softball tournament a few days before his hospitalization, and he had felt short of breath. But, he claimed, God made his team lose their semifinal game, thereby preventing them from playing one more. “If it hadn’t been for God’s intervention, I would have collapsed”, he said. My immediate response to this was to think that if he had collapsed, his illness would have been discovered earlier and may not have been as serious as it ended up being, but that would not have fit into the great narrative of God’s plan. Just like in Pastor Lewis’s case above, Pastor Matthew’s story confirms the theory that conventional medicine in no way seems to be in opposition to the work God can do through healing. Matthew Barnett underlined that it was Jesus who had healed him and saved his life, but in no way did he try to hide the fact that he had gone to a hospital to receive conventional medical treatment.

## **Embodied Christianity**

The different examples and theories I have presented here supports the idea that the form of Pentecostalism I met in Los Angeles can be said to have a fairly corporal expression. I would argue that it is possible that the strong belief among my informants in the Holy Spirit’s healing abilities to some degree shaped the way they viewed their bodies. If your health is in the hands of God, if God decides when your body will be sick and when it will be healed, your body is less *yours*. Of course, just like my informants sought help from conventional medicine, they also acknowledged the way lifestyle choices can affect a person’s body and health. For instance, most of the Pentecostals I met avoided cigarettes and alcohol. Still, it somehow seemed like there was only so much one could do in terms of maintaining one’s health, because in the end, it all laid in God’s hands. This tendency towards lower demands of responsibility was present in everyday acts as well. One Tuesday, the usual group of volunteers from Providing Hope had done an outreach on Venice Beach that we ended up both starting and finishing early, mainly because the traffic – a major concern when moving around in Los Angeles – was better than expected. Two women who were supposed to take part in the outreach showed up on the time we initially had told them, but we were already

finished. Instead of asking us why we had not informed them we would be early or why we had not waited, one of the women said “I’m sorry we missed it, but I understand very well that the Holy Spirit asked you to start earlier”. In effect, no one could be blamed for anything, because it was all either said to be God’s plan or in some cases a result of Satan trying to “win someone over”.

In this sense, there is room for individualism within a faith that despite its claims to promote a personal relationship with God comes off as fairly collective. Those who have agreed to live by Jesus are all equally valuable and equally saved from eternal damnation in the eyes of God. Every single saved person has the same potential for attaining spiritual gifts, and anyone can be trained to be a pastor. They have the same goal of worldwide evangelism, and – as I saw in every service at the megachurch – there is a strong collectivism to their worship. People should ideally adhere to the same Biblical rules, and they are all expected to put God ahead of themselves. Still, there is much room for making one’s own decisions; when I heard a Pentecostal say she was going to “pray over something” to make a decision in her life, I do not doubt that the message she claimed to receive from the Holy Spirit seemed completely genuine to her. She had received the word of the Lord, and had to act accordingly. Still, one cannot rule out the possibility that her own wishes had an impact on the decisions she made. And, as long as her decision did not contradict any commonly accepted Biblical teachings or rules, no one could really dispute her. After all, it was the word of the Holy Spirit.

Pentecostalism can also be said to be corporal in the way regular, visible worship is performed. This was most apparent in services in church, but also other types of prayer and worship were expressed through the body and through movement. In *Language, Charisma and Creativity* (1997), where Thomas Csordas has studied Catholic Pentecostals, he argues that speaking of their worship as a ritual may be misleading, since for them, there is “no room for distinction between sacred and secular action in everyday life” (Csordas 1997, p. 108). Although the Pentecostals Csordas studied were Catholics and the ones I worked with are Protestants, I would say there are enough similarities to claim that this rings true for my informants as well. Being a Christian, for my informants, was such a central part of everyday life that there seemed to be no part of it that did not include some reference to God. Csordas goes on to argue that despite the fusion of worship life and everyday life, “practices of collective and individual worship increasingly became techniques of the body in the sense defined by Marcel Mauss” (Csordas 1997, p. 108).

Mauss describes “techniques of the body” as well-developed bodily practices relative to culture, gender and age. He mentions techniques like running, swimming and eating, but also child-rearing and dancing. His point is that these ways of using the body are not natural but taught, and that they vary greatly (Mauss, 1934). In a similar sense, I found many of the practices of the Pentecostals I studied to be remarkably in unison for people with such different backgrounds. This goes for conversion narratives and ways of praying as well as the bodily practices presented shortly. Could it be that what is considered proper practice of religion is somehow taught to new converts and that they are socialized into a new faith in the same manner I argued praying and evangelizing could be taught in chapter three?

Very few people sat completely still and unaffected during the services I participated in at Angelus Temple Megachurch. Verbally, people participated by singing along to the lyrics of the songs performed by the church band, cheering when they agreed with something the speaker said, or whispering prayers, either in decipherable words or in glossolalia, to themselves. One could also hear frequent shouts of “Amen!”, “Hallelujah!” or “Preach it!” from people in the audience. When it came to body movement, this was slightly more ‘organized’, in the sense that actions like walking up to stand closer to the stage were restricted to the beginning and the end of services. This was largely because the service always opened with four or five worship songs from the band where the lyrics were projected on a large screen, and what was mostly youth between 15 and 25 stood close to the stage like one can see at any rock concert. The services in church seemed to be adapted to a younger audience, and from what I could tell, this worked; I would estimate that almost half of the audience were in their twenties or younger, and I heard several people praise the church for being so youthful. Pastor Matthew Barnett was also fairly young, and he states in his book “The Church That Never Sleeps” (2000), that he himself was merely 23 when he started the Dream Center. The reason many worshippers – probably more than at the beginning – went up to the stage towards the *end* of the service was the altar call discussed in chapter two, where anyone that needed salvation, healing or any other help were called to come up and receive prayer.

In addition to these overt bodily practices – moving around in church – opening and concluding all services, there was also movement and corporal expressions throughout the service. Many people would raise one or both arms, fold their hands, lean their head on the seat in front of them in prayer, or put their arms around each other. Personal contact was encouraged – the speaker often told us to give the person next to us a hug or a handshake and

say we were glad Jesus had put us next to them. Bodily involvement in worship during services was both encouraged and scripted – still, it could and often did happen spontaneously.

Spontaneous and dynamic as the movements and corporal worship in church were, there seemed to be unwritten rules for them. What was accepted behavior in church was miles from anything I had seen in a quiet, Lutheran Norwegian church earlier in my life, but there were still norms limiting what could be done. For instance, it did not seem to be accepted to approach stage outside the scripted openings and endings or to walk around in church during service. I did not see anyone get reprimanded for this, but it was just not something anyone did, at least while I was attending church. Children and youth bussed in from the poorer parts of Los Angeles sometimes seemed bored and less concentrated during services, and one of the girls from the Movement responsible for watching over unaccompanied children in church told me they usually made them take notes or do their homework during the service to get them to sit still. She also said that if the children could not behave one week, they would not be allowed to come to church the next week. This kind of punishment only applied to bussed-in youth from the housing projects, and not youth who came in with their families.

## United worship

As mentioned, I noticed how *unison* people's religious practices were. Even within one single service, one could see clear tendencies in what was considered common and accepted behavior. Because this was apparent in the conversion narratives, in the healing discourse, in glossolalia and in prayer, too, it says something about the way religious knowledge can be transferred between people. Just as I argued with Mauss (2003) that praying could be learned behavior and “endorsed by social tradition” (Mauss 2003, p. 33), I would assume new converts learn how to behave ‘correctly’ in church by looking at other, more experienced Pentecostals. Still, it is hard to say how conscious this socialization is, both for the experienced performer of faith, and for the new convert.

In his study of social outreach and megachurches in Tennessee, Omri Elisha describes how megachurches often are popular among middle-class urban and suburban professionals (2008), a tendency also pointed out by Thumma and Tavis (2007). Angelus Temple stood out from this trend with its location in the inner city and its focus on involving the poorest in their services, but it does correspond with another element Elisha mentions; that megachurches are



often known for their evangelical mobilization (Elisha 2008, p. 186). Although Elisha's informants were not Pentecostals, they still had several things in common with mine, especially when it came to using a megachurch as a platform for social outreach in the inner city.

Related to what I claimed in chapter two, that evangelizing for Angelus Temple and the Dream Center was a legitimate component of social work and not the other way around, I would also say that the concept of the megachurch rested upon the social engagement, and that it was not organized the way Omri Elisha's megachurch seemed to be; with the church being the basis that social work was organized within (Elisha 2008). Reading Pastor Matthew Barnett's accounts of the establishing of the Dream Center, *The Church that Never Sleeps* (2000), it seems that not very much had changed in the twelve years between when the book came out and my fieldwork. The values, ideas, organization principles and even many of the ministries and weekly outreaches were more or less the same in his book as what I saw. The major difference was that the Dream Center did not yet have Angelus Temple when the book was written in 2000. Services were held in the gym room at the Center, and although I have no numbers for attendance during that period, I have been in that gym room several times, and I highly doubt it could house enough people to be called a megachurch, even with several weekly services. It was not until 2001 that the Dream Center was offered to take over the historical building of Angelus Temple, central to the Pentecostal Movement in the 1930s. According to the guide that gave tours around the Dream Center, the church needed both a pastor and a congregation, and Barnett was offered the position. The church had to leave Assemblies of God and join the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, but changing a congregation's membership like this was not focused on and did not seem like a 'big deal'. Either way; the Dream Center and their social outreach and rehabilitation programs were well established before the megachurch came along. In his book, Barnett describes his philosophy of staying in the inner city, building relationships with the people that live there, and by "outlasting the other organizations", as one volunteer put it. By going out to low-income communities, offering anything from street cleaning and food to prayer every Saturday and then sending buses to take people to church the following Sunday, Matthew Barnett and his organization seem to have found a successful way to make people come to church. In Elisha's example, the megachurch seemed to be a place for suburbanites to meet and organize outreaches (Elisha 2011). The Dream Center went further by inviting the marginalized to church and taking active measures to make them attend. Matthew Barnett's philosophy of

placing a church in the inner city and staying there, laid out in the years before 2000, seemed to still be well in action when I was there in 2012.

## **Social Action and Weber's ideal types**

It is hardly necessary to say how central theories of giving and reciprocity are in anthropology. As described in chapter one, charity and caring for the unfortunate in the United States has by the help of the Faith-Based Initiative increasingly become a task for churches and non-governmental charity organizations over the past few years. It is evident that charity work, both religious and other, *is* giving. In *Economy and society*, Max Weber defines four ideal types of rationality that I would argue are applicable to explaining motivations behind social action and giving; instrumental rationality, value-rationality, affectual rationality and traditional or habitual rationality (Weber 1978 pp. 24-26).

The first one, instrumental rationality, focuses on expected results, on calculated means to an end. Since everyone that is saved in Pentecostal theology believe they will go to Heaven *sola fide* – on faith alone – calculating results might not be as important when engaging in social work, at least if we focus on eternal salvation as the overruling goal. Weber's second rationality type focuses on values – doing good for good's sake regardless of the outcome – and seems to be more applicable to the kind of charity work my informants were doing. As in most other 'world religions', charity is an essential principle in Christianity. This Weberian ideal type combined with his third one – affectual, the impulsive rationality controlled by feelings – is in my opinion what best describes what I sensed as the rationality that lay behind the work the volunteers of Providing Hope and the Dream Center were doing on the streets.

Although the outreaches Providing Hope did were planned and at least partially organized, there were also elements of spontaneity to them. The participants followed the "script" of giving away whatever we had available of snacks that day while talking to people about God, but I also saw many acts inspired by what can be said to be affectual and impulsive rationality in people's charity work. I was once walking around in a South Central parking lot with Eric, a nineteen year old boy that was interning at the Dream Center, and we stopped to talk to a homeless woman. She told us how cold she was, and asked us if we had brought any socks. We had not, but Eric immediately took off his own and gave them to the woman. Another night he gave away his belt to a man, despite the fact that the man seemed to be heavily intoxicated and not responding to anything we said. Allie from the Movement once talked to

an older man who seemed to be cold and promptly gave him her sweater to keep. Acts like these were probably driven by spontaneous compassion, but as Weber underlines, few of his ideal types of rationality can be found in their “pure form”. Combinations are more common (Weber 1978). It is probably not possible to rule out an element of instrumental rationality in what Eric and Allie did, since they both told others about what they had done later, something that undoubtedly contributed to other Christians seeing them as ‘good people’. What also could have had an impact on Allie and Eric’s actions, though, is Weber’s fourth ideal type of rationality, namely traditional rationality, determined by habit (Weber 1978). Both Allie and Eric were involved with the Movement, the Dream Center’s minister-training program. Compassion and self-sacrifice were important aspects of the curriculum taught in this program. Rebecca, another girl from the Movement, once told me how everyone in the program one day before Christmas had been ordered to take off their shoes and donate them to the homeless on skid row, no matter what shoes they were wearing and whether they had other shoes. Considering the ideal that Allie and Eric were taught in their program, one might say there were also elements of habit in their compassion.

## Reciprocity

*Giving* for Pentecostal charity workers meant more than just the act of providing food and clothes. Their goal was not only to feed the poor, but to give them the ultimate gift; eternal salvation. Can this type of giving be seen as unconditional? In his famous essay *The Gift*, Marcel Mauss says that “The unreciprocated gift still makes the person who has accepted it inferior, particularly when it has been accepted with no thought of returning it” (Mauss 1990, p. 83). Much can be said about the power relations between giver and receiver in a charity context, where reciprocation takes a different form. When my informants went out on the streets to “feed people and love them”, as they said, it was always clear that those people could not give anything material back. When viewing eternal salvation as a non-material gift, though, is it possible that a surprising amount of homeless and marginalized people accepted Christ every time we went out *because* they saw a space where they could reciprocate? Was repeating the salvation prayer a way of “giving back”? Omri Elisha argues that for evangelical charity workers, “their theology asserts that even the most “unconditional” gift of all (eternal salvation) is conditioned on the recipient’s obligation to receive that which ultimately can never be repaid and thus remain a willing subject of divine authority (Elisha 2008, p. 4).

As far as I can see, Elisha is saying that when people in need accept the ‘gift’ of salvation from evangelicals, they are really putting themselves in ‘debt’, agreeing to live a life under God in exchange for a place in Heaven. The gift of salvation cannot be unconditional, because it demands that one gives back by living ‘right’, usually for the rest of one’s life. In practice, though, as I argued in chapter two, the acceptance of Jesus and of the gift of salvation seemed to be taken lightly by many. Some people were even open about having been saved multiple times, and none of the evangelicals had the opportunity to ‘check up’ on converts and make sure they were sincere in their salvation. When saying “yes” to the question of taking Jesus into one’s heart was so easy, and when it had no other consequences than whatever restrictions or changes the converts decided for themselves, accepting salvation from a Christian charity worker became an appropriate way to give back immaterially, to say thanks for material gifts. As Mary Douglas states in the foreword of the 1990 edition of Mauss’ *The Gift*; “the whole idea of a free gift is a misunderstanding” (1990, p. ix). The gift economy of charity and social work becomes increasingly complicated when religious proselytizing is involved and salvation has the potential to be a gift the religious charity workers feel they are giving away, while the recipients mean to give something by *accepting* the gift. When Mauss claims that the unreciprocated gift makes the receiver inferior (1990, p. 83), and when we know that in a society like the American marginalized people are often dependent on charity organizations, the result may be that the receiver feels relieved to know that they can give something back to their benefactors. I am absolutely not saying that none of the conversions on the streets were sincere, but as I discussed in chapter two, the discrepancies between what counted as salvations on the streets and the personal conversion narratives of the evangelical activists were significant. When the fact that people my informants met in their outreach work were prone to accepting salvation, often multiple times, is seen in combination with my informants’ acceptance for counting even the ‘weakest’ experiences of conversions as genuine, it becomes a possible explanation for the rapid expansion of Pentecostalism.

## Summing up

Both the spiritual healing discussed in the first part of this chapter and the theories of reciprocity above can serve as partial explanations for why people either become Pentecostals, or end up being counted as such. In addition, the unity one can experience through embodied worship practices combined with all the measures the church takes to ensure attendance, might help us understand why people *stay* in the faith. Still, what has been seen as one of the

crucial appealing factors of Pentecostalism may also be central to this understanding; charismatic leadership. In the following chapter I will discuss this, as well as documentation of charity work as a way of performing Christianity.



# Chapter five: The economy of charisma

*“Give, and it will be given to you”*

Luke 3:28

*On the bus bringing me and a few other young volunteers from the Dream Center down to the skid row area, we are told that The Jonah Project, one of the churches in downtown Los Angeles who offers shelter and food for the homeless, is closing down. One of our leaders explains that we are going to go there to see if we can help the youth church group – someone few of us have heard of before – organize one last big event. When we get there, it looks like there are more than enough people helping out, and I mostly sit and observe. A fence has been put up in the church room, and behind it several volunteers are setting up stacks of doughnuts and cakes, as well as coffee on a table. On another table, some girls are laying out clothes from large plastic bags. The girls are chatting and laughing while making everything ready. On my side of the fence, a long line of homeless people has formed, reaching almost to the back of the big church room. One of the volunteers is taking pictures of the people in line, and then she starts videotaping while another girl ‘interviews’ the homeless man at the front, asking him whether he is excited about getting doughnuts and coffee. The man seems like he knows what he is supposed to say and answers something about being very grateful and excited about the doughnuts. The homeless are kept waiting for a long time while the group prays together, and when they are finally let through the fence, they are closely supervised to control how many doughnuts and how many items of clothing they each take. A man comes over to me and ironically mumbles “great show”.*

## Taking pictures

Making oneself available for the documentation religious charity workers often were occupied with producing when they were providing services for people seemed to be something recipients of these services were used to, a part of navigating in some kind of ‘charity economy’. Although neither the Dream Center nor Providing Hope were as ‘extreme’ as the church group in the example above with their video cameras, I did see a tendency in most of

the charity work I was part of in Los Angeles; documentation was important. In this chapter, I will discuss how showing others the work one did was connected to economy, and how both documentation and money was entwined with a signature feature of Pentecostalism; charisma and charismatic leaders.

Going out with the Dream Center to skid row was an exception to the tendency of always documenting. Although the Dream Center volunteers who went to other places – like low-income housing projects – frequently posted pictures on the internet of the children and adults they met there, we were told that skid row was different. As volunteers, many of us new to it, we were explicitly told not to take pictures of any of the people staying there. “We don’t want them to feel like animals in a zoo”, one of the leaders explained once. A significant amount of the volunteers were quite young, and probably thought to be more likely to snap cell phone pictures of things they did to share it on the internet. Once this rule was established, no one seemed to have any trouble understanding why photographing someone could be a violation. Still, I heard no protests or debate from any Dream Center volunteers when we encountered the church group described above.

Providing Hope never adhered to the principle of giving people a chance of privacy in any of their outreaches when it came to documentation. The areas we frequented were not as visibly ‘bad’ as skid row, but the great majority of the people we met were still poor, homeless, intoxicated, doing sex work or in some other difficult situation. In fact, taking pictures at outreaches was a recurrently discussed topic in Providing Hope. Not because anyone questioned whether they were entitled to do it, or if it would be unethical to photograph people, often without asking for their consent, but rather to find out who were to take the pictures and even how to get the lighting good enough at nighttime.

Partially because he was sick (albeit well-functioning) and partially because he was often occupied with other things, Pastor Lewis did not always participate in our outreaches. Often, he would show up in the middle of an outreach to “get some action shots with his camera” as Michael described it. Lewis took pictures of those that had received food eating it, of us making and giving away food and more often; volunteers from Providing Hope posing with homeless or poor people. The same night or the day after, a few pictures were posted to Pastor Lewis’s private facebook page, along with the agreed-upon numbers of how many had been fed and saved, respectively. The pictures received significant praise from many of Pastor



Lewis's friends all over the world, and other Christians told him how wonderful the work he was doing for God was.

## **Faith-based financing and “poverty porn”**

Since Providing Hope is a non-profit organization, they are tax-exempt under the tax code 501(c)(3). This subcategory of the 501(c) federal law section implies that the organization is public serving rather than just member-serving, and that it relieves the state of burdens it might otherwise have to bear. It also means that donations to the organization make the givers able to claim tax deduction. Most religious non-profit organizations fall under this code, not only because they use their funds to help the needy, but also because promotion of religion is defined as one of the purposes included in tax code 501(c)(3) (Salomon 1996). Like most other non-profit religious organizations that fulfill the purpose of George W. Bush's Faith-Based Initiative discussed earlier, Providing Hope was dependent on donations for the daily running of the organization. Instead of having the state contributing with financial support directly to an organization – described by the Dream Center guide as undesired because “government funding means government control” – private donors are rewarded with reductions in their taxes when giving money to a private non-profit organization. The premise, Ken Stern argues, is “that individuals will make better decisions regarding social investments than will our representative government” (Stern 2013).

The term “poverty porn” or “development porn” is sometimes used in discussions about charity and development work, described by Matt Collin as “any type of media, be it written, photographed or filmed, which exploits the poor's condition in order to generate the necessary sympathy for selling newspapers or increasing charitable donations or support for a given cause” (aidthoughts.org, 2009). The term is perhaps mostly used about international charity organizations working in developing countries, but it is also applicable in the case of Providing Hope. The full ethical discussion about whether it is OK or not to take pictures of people in need is too large to be taken here, but a few questions are in order. If one argues that photographing people living on the streets is fine if one asks them first and then gives them something, like food, can we really talk about consent when it comes to those who have absolutely nothing? And can the documentation practices of Providing Hope be justified if it is said to be serving a ‘greater good’, potentially providing the organization with money that ultimately in some form will go back to the marginalized people themselves?

Although I never heard anyone in Providing Hope talk about posing for a picture as a requirement for receiving food, it is likely that some of the people we met thought so, just like the practice with accepting salvation. Many of those photographed did maybe not want to challenge their benefactors, some were not even asked for permission, many were intoxicated and no one that I heard of were informed that their pictures would be put on the internet. And, as mentioned – no one in the organization questioned the photographing practice; I was even told ‘funny’ stories about bringing hidden cameras to Hollywood for filming prostitutes without them noticing. My personal resentments toward this uncritical documenting practice, though, were not only because of the lack of fully informed consent from most, or the fact that it was hard for me to see how for instance girls trying to get out of prostitution could benefit from identifiable half-naked pictures of themselves on the internet. I was also skeptical toward it because of the unclear financial situation in the organization. As I will discuss later, the way money were distributed in Providing Hope made me doubt both that all the documentation was absolutely necessary to keep the organization running, *and* that the need for donations was the only motivation behind the publicizing of compassion.

## **Being a good person**

People’s desire to both be and be seen as an evangelizing Christian and a good person can also be a key factor in understanding why my informants were so occupied with documenting the work they were doing, and may even say something about why they were contributing to charity work at all. If the principles in Pentecostal theory say that accepting Jesus and repenting of your sins is the only requirement for receiving eternal life and getting access to Heaven, why do these people choose to dedicate significant portions of their lives to not only serving Jesus and spreading the gospel, but also helping the underprivileged? I have already discussed Weber’s ideal types of rationality as explanations, but I do believe that identification and recognition were important here.

As most other aspects of faith and practicing religion, as we have seen, motivational factors varied greatly from person to person. Some Pentecostals were more occupied with self-promotion of their own kindness, but this was probably more apparent in the people who went to church occasionally and rarely participated in charity work – the same people who, when the offering buckets were sent around in church, wrote their own names on envelopes with money to ensure their donations were registered. Letting others know about the good you

were doing was more than approved by the Dream Center; before we split up in different buses to go out on the big Saturday outreaches, we were all encouraged to make a post on the microblog website Twitter about the outreach. The speaker dictated to us word for word what to write, and gave us a few minutes to collectively advertise what we were about to do. Undoubtedly, this was also used as promotion for the event, but it was angled in a personal way.

I noticed less of this self-promoting aspect in Michael, Joseph and most of the others working for Providing Hope. A significant amount of the adult volunteers could be said to have a background from one of the groups we were trying to help, and I got the impression that a lot of their motivation for doing evangelizing social work had its basis in gratitude. Finding Jesus had gotten them out of their hopeless lives, and they wanted to give the gift of salvation to others. For instance, Joseph had been homeless himself, and often talked about his “special touch” with homeless youth. Megan and Lauren, two of the women who sometimes participated in the Friday night prostitute outreach, had worked in the sex industry themselves. So had Curtis, who used to be a pimp and a drug dealer. Most of the men who lived in the Men’s home had recently been or were still in difficult situations. Initially, I had thought that the fact that many Pentecostal converts had “hit rock bottom” as they frequently called it, before turning to the faith would be something both new converts and the church itself would try not to emphasize too much, but this was not the case at all. Recruiting from what seemed to be the part of the population with the toughest lives and the most problems was an element the Pentecostal church took pride in.

## **Radical change**

Anthropologist Joel Robbins ties this tendency of Pentecostal converts coming from difficult backgrounds to what he sees as a discontinuity in Pentecostalism itself (Robbins 2010). He sums up different works on Pentecostalism that find it to be a process of cultural change (Buckley and Kenney 1995), something that requires you to “make a complete break with the past” (Meyer 1998, pp. 182-208), a culture “against culture” (Dombrowski 2001) and as a break with “dominant culture” (Droogers 2010). In short, Robbins describes the different shapes Pentecostalism takes globally as a “universal Christian rendering with the past” (Robbins 2010 p. 160).

Although much of the work on Pentecostalism mentioned above comes from societies in Africa or Latin America, the focus on a radical difference from a past life was central among my informants, too. None of them seemed embarrassed about their past, even though most had led a life they now considered highly sinful. As we saw in chapter two, narratives about past lives were a defining feature of the religiosity of many of my informants. Since they had repented and been forgiven of all of their sins, having had a troubled past was something to be proud rather than ashamed of. Not everyone had as dramatic histories as Joseph who had been homeless or Megan who had been a prostitute for seven years, but they still talked about it. Allie from the Movement sometimes discussed her past life, when she had frequently been “partying all night”. But, as she said, “that was temporary fun, this is forever fun”. As Robbins argues: “the people who find Pentecostalism appealing tend to be those whose lives have already been subject to a good deal of discontinuity and tension (Robbins 2010, p. 163).

## **“Who doesn’t like money?”**

Going back to the topic of donations and the organization’s finances, this was an under-communicated but still ever-present issue. As far as I know, none of those who lived in the Men’s Home had permanent employment while living there, and could not contribute to the household economy with much money. They were required to help out with Providing Hope’s work, but this demand was also negotiated in an interesting way, as we will see later. I was surprised to learn how little they had to settle with economically; Pastor Lewis gave Jeffrey, the director of the home, around \$100 a week to cover food, gas and other essential items for between five and eight grown men. Sometimes the house got excess food from the Dream Center food bank, for which they were very grateful. Jeffrey expressed concerns about the running of the home and how hard it was to set up a budget; while he collected and organized all the receipts documenting expenses, Pastor Lewis thought it was too much paperwork, and did not bother looking through it, Jeffrey said.

The critique of Pastor Lewis’s leadership style was very subtle, and anything remotely negative about him was usually said in a sentence starting with “I love him, but...”. Still, it was apparent to me that the running of Providing Hope sometimes was made more difficult by the way finances were distributed. Early in my fieldwork, I assumed that the organization just did not have that much money, but Pastor Lewis presented it otherwise. At a neighborhood barbecue in South Central once, he explained that some of the products he had developed in

an invention project he had come up with had been sold to a large company for thousands of dollars, and that all the money went straight to Providing Hope. Still, it seemed to me that little of that money made their way down to the actual running of the organization, exemplified well by all the issues we had with the car. We were completely dependent on having a van to go through with any of the outreaches, but the one we used was barely running. When the van eventually broke down, Pastor Lewis was hesitant about getting a new one; he wanted to wait until a good offer came along. For a few weeks, we had to rely on others to borrow their cars in order to even get the outreaches done, or we had to cancel them. Michael told me that when the last van they used had broken down, they had money donated to buy a new one, but Pastor Lewis had decided to buy his wife a minivan instead.

None of the people who worked with Providing Hope were paid money for it, at least not in the period I spent with them. Michael and Joseph raised their own support – without elaborating on who exactly they received money from –, and although they got food and housing from the Dream Center, they did not seem to have any extra money for activities or purchases outside the work with the organization. Both were in their mid-thirties, and did express a wish to get married and have children, but as Michael said: it was difficult for them to date anyone when they did not have money. The American society is still quite traditional when it comes to heterosexual dating, and the man is usually expected to pay for dinner and other activities on a date. This perspective might highlight another factor in understanding the motivations behind dedicating a great portion of one's life to charity work; a safe life situation. Although I do not doubt that neither Michael nor Joseph's passion for working with charity was genuine, and though they never expressed this view themselves, it might be possible to interpret their acceptance of working for no pay as a wish for stability and predictability in life. Quitting Providing Hope would mean having to find a place to live, cooking one's own food, and especially trying to find a job in a city where unemployment is high. Despite the – in my eyes – unfair treatment of the Providing Hope volunteers, Michael described the work they did as “rewarding in a way money can't buy”, and said he planned to do it for at least a few more years.

Although participating in the outreach work was a requirement for living at the Men's Home, the way the residents contributed varied. As mentioned, involvement was negotiable. Ron, whose conversion narrative with the suicide attempt and the visual representation of God was presented in chapter two, came down from Washington to live at the house in April. He had lived at the previous Men's Home that Providing Hope had been running at the Dream Center

two years earlier, and now, he said, God had sent him back to Los Angeles after he had lost his job in Washington. Ron was energetic and outgoing, and often talked about how much of a spiritual person he was. Despite being an eager evangelical, Ron did not always participate in the outreaches we did, and he was very specific about “needing his prayer time” which usually consisted of him spending time in his room, alone. Jeffrey, the director of the house, let him do what he wanted, claiming that Ron had a special spiritual gift. Some of the others were annoyed at the ‘special treatment’ Ron got. I suspect the reason Ron was treated differently was the fact that he had money. Recently having been laid off from his job, Ron still received unemployment benefits from the government. He used these money to “bless the house”, as he put it, which meant buying different things for the house and those who lived there. He seemed to be proud of the fact that he contributed, and made sure to tell everyone about the things he had bought. Curtis would probably had agreed with me on this analysis, since he pointed out that simply having money should not entitle Ron to “sleep all day”, and that while money is good to have, “obedience is more important than sacrifice”.

If we assume that his financial contributions was the reason Ron did not have to fulfill the same requirements as the others in the house, this opens up an interesting discussion on economy and on negotiation the duties of a Pentecostal Christian. It is possible that Jeffrey was convinced Ron had unique spiritual gifts and for that reason only relieved him, but in my opinion, it is unlikely that this had nothing to do with money. My informants were eager to point out that they were not like other religions or Christian denominations – “at least we’re not after people’s money”, one of them said. They often spoke unfavorably of or made jokes about other faiths, especially Mormonism or Scientology, the latter known to require large financial contributions from its members.

*Prosperity theology*, or prosperity gospel has become increasingly popular in charismatic movements, and is described by Joel Robbins as “those forms of Charismatic Christianity in which believers expect God to give them physical health and material wealth on earth in the present, as well as a place in heaven in the future” (2010, p. 170). Robbins goes on to explain that in order to realize these benefits, followers must tithe (2010, p. 170). Tithing is explained in Leviticus 27:30 as giving a tenth of one’s income, a formerly institutionalized biblical practice. At services in Angelus Temple, the offering was a fixed part of the program, and it was held during and straight after a testimony, which also can be said to be a documentation practice that indirectly generated money, even if it is different from the photographing practices discussed earlier. Both tithing and *offering* – defined by the church’s website as a

love gift over and above one's tithe (angelustemple.com, 2012) – were encouraged from the congregation, but not required. Instructions on how to pay by check were always given from the speaker, and buckets were swiftly sent around by ushers to collect checks and cash.

Given the circumstances with the emotional testimony and the equally emotional response the audience usually gave in church, one would think that the speaker guiding the congregation through the offering would emphasize all the charity work the church and the Dream Center would be able to do with the help of the donations. This was rarely the case, though. Although the impressive results the Dream Center laid claim to were mentioned a few times, the main focus was on personal economic gain, or prosperity. The chorus was always that if you gave to the church, God would make sure you received gifts yourself. Sometimes, the message was backed up by a new testimony; someone telling the story of how they once had been poor, but still given their last money to the church. A few days later, “through a miracle”, they had received double or triple of the money they had donated. What this miracle consisted of was never explained. Offerings should be one of the believers' top priorities, and no one should doubt that Jesus would give back, seemed to be the message.

Among the relatively scarce anthropological research done on prosperity theology, we have John and Jean Comaroff, who suggest that the prosperity gospel can be grouped with other ‘occult economies’ and in this way be linked to neoliberal economic conditions in Africa and other places (2000, p. 292). Thus, prosperity theology becomes a way to understand capitalism in places with high degrees of social difference. The Comaroffs' analysis is based mostly on an African context, but I would argue that this explanation is possible to apply to the situation in contemporary America, too. Still, I would claim that Simon Coleman's theory of the prosperity gospel as a complex gift exchange system (2000, p. 198) is more applicable to the circumstances I observed in Los Angeles. As I have used Maussian theories of gift exchange to explain the relationship between my informants and the marginalized people they met in chapter four, Coleman uses some of the same theories to argue that the giving of money by Christians is an externalization of the self, and that it is not only giving to the church that entitles a return, but *giving itself*. In Coleman's analysis, an unknown other is expected to return a gift, not necessarily the receiver (Coleman 2000, p.200-202). With this perspective, it becomes easier to understand the way my informants attributed every positive thing that happened to them to an act of God and a sign that He had reciprocated their tithes and offerings.

As a result of prosperity theological teachings affecting my informants, dreaming of wealth was never discouraged. Rodriguez, one of the men at the Men's Home, had money as the main focus of most of his prayers, both the ones he prayed to himself and the ones he prayed with people we met. Sometimes people on the streets would mention finances in their prayer requests, and Ron would say that it was perfectly fine to want to be rich, and that while being greedy is not a good thing, the way the world and the economy work today, one needs money to live. Another example of both the prosperity gospel and of Pastor Lewis's way of governing the organization's finances comes from a raffle held at one of Providing Hope's neighborhood barbecues in South Central. Pastor Lewis had provided boxes of new toys and teddy bears as prizes for the participants, but also put two cash prizes of \$5 each for the winners. Everyone present was given lottery tickets for free, and numbers were drawn. Although both of the two first winners were children, whom the toys were probably meant for, they chose the money. "We're giving out money", Pastor Lewis said, "because who doesn't like money?".

## **The gift of charismatic leadership**

Pastor Lewis seemed to have a 'special touch' with both the underprivileged people we met and with his small congregation in Providing Hope. Senior pastor at the Dream Center and Angelus Temple Matthew Barnett, too, seemed to have a hold on his audience, evident in how almost everything he uttered on stage during services was verbally and physically supported by an enthusiastic crowd. In the tradition of revitalization theory, Charismatic leaders have usually been seen as essential to the spread of Pentecostalism (Robbins 2010, p. 162). Charisma and charismatic power have been thoroughly theorized by Max Weber, who defined charisma as

*"...applied to a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These as such are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader"* (Weber 1947, p. 358-359).

Although Weber can be said to have laid the basis for the secular use of the concept, the origins come from Christianity. One might argue that Weber extended the definition of charisma from supernatural into superhuman, or that he transformed the concept from a religious one to a sociological one (Csordas 1997, p. 133). Today, the term is used just as



much in describing captivating or charming people in a non-religious context. Because the concept of charisma has named the Charismatic and Pentecostal movement it might be easy to think that Pentecostals see their leaders in the tradition Weber's concept was derived from; as people with supernatural powers, chosen by God to lead. I would argue that it is not necessarily so.

Were the pastors I encountered or observed among the Pentecostals in Los Angeles charismatic? Absolutely. Both what was described as Lewis's 'special touch' with the marginalized and Matthew Barnett's enormous popularity, made me see that my informants trusted, loved and looked up to their leaders. Still, I do not think that they considered their leaders to be *better* than themselves, as chosen by God for a higher position than they themselves could ever achieve. One of the key concepts in Pentecostal theology is the ability to attain spiritual gifts, and according to my informant Ana, *anyone* who gives their life to Jesus and accept salvation can attain one or more of the spiritual gifts listed in 1st Corinthians 12:8-10, including but not limited to speaking in tongues and interpreting it, healing the sick and the giving prophecies, as described in chapter three. Since these gifts are given to all believers – though in various degrees – no one can be said to be specifically chosen by God. Although leadership can be one of the spiritual gifts, the fact that some leaders have this gift does not make them more divine or more supernatural than other believers. They do believe that God has decided that His plan for the pastors is that they shall lead, but God has a plan for *everyone*, and the believers can never know what this plan is until they have a revelation or something happens that makes them realize what God wants for them. Pentecostals look up to their leaders and acknowledge their position along with their seemingly superior knowledge of the Gospel and the ways to interpret it, but as long as this insight can potentially come to anyone, it is not some supernatural divinity that set leaders apart from others. Rather, their personal – but secular – charisma along with their theological education or insight in the Bible and Christian teachings make them fit to lead and to engage others.

Thomas Csordas makes a similar point. *In Language, Charisma and Creativity* (1997), he notes that “spiritual gifts are available to all Charismatics, and this precludes their exclusive adherence to a single individual” (p. 133). Here, Csordas challenges Weber's definition and attempts to adapt a theory of charisma where charisma is something distributed *throughout* a community of believers, not just centered around a single, leading individual (Csordas 1997). This corresponds with what I felt when I first came to know the Pentecostals; even if I was

slightly critical towards the leaders and their message, I was very intrigued by the many welcoming and winning personalities I met among the ‘common’ believers.

In addition to what I saw as the more even distribution charisma, it was common knowledge that leadership skills were something one could learn. The Movement program at the Dream Center is an example of this. The Providing Hope Men’s Home also had a leadership training program, although this was only something I heard Pastor Lewis tell people and that I never saw much evidence of. It is interesting, though, how leadership along with other spiritual gifts like knowledge could be taught, while the more concrete gifts of healing and glossolalia had to appear by themselves. The point I want to make is that while the term charisma is often religiously interpreted, I believe that the Pentecostal leaders I encountered were seen as charismatic in a secular sense *within* a religious context.

Weber also states, though, that “What is alone important is how the individual is actually regarded by those subject to charismatic authority, by his ‘followers’ or ‘disciples’” (Weber 1947, p. 359). It was difficult to pinpoint exactly how this part of charisma worked, because openly criticizing each other was something my informants just did not do. As I got to know them better, they opened up to me and sometimes started talking about people who were not present, but open confrontation hardly ever happened. They all seemed overly shy of conflicts. I heard numerous examples of informants fully agreeing with each other on topics only to say something entirely different about it when they were with someone else. The leaders were certainly seen as leaders by their ‘followers’, but criticism was never voiced directly to either leaders or anyone else as far as I could see.

Combining this knowledge with Csordas’ theory of charisma as something spread throughout a congregation challenges the theory of charismatic leaders as absolutely essential to Pentecostalism. Joseph and Michael’s subtle but significant critique of the Pastor’s leadership style also underlines this. They were driven by much more than just their respect for a charismatic leader. My data only stems from two different Pentecostal leaders and is not representative, but I am fairly sure that neither Pastor Lewis in Providing Hope nor Matthew Barnett at the Dream Center held their position only or even mainly because of their charisma. As discussed in chapter two, origin narratives are important, but not just for converts. Organizations, too, have origin stories that are told and retold and that shape the discourse surrounding each organization. Just like Pastor Lewis came on a call from God from the countryside to the big city to start Providing Hope, Pastor Matthew was led by God from

Arizona to start a church in LA, a history told both in his books (Barnett 2000; Barnett and Barna 2011) and by himself in church. Both occupying the role of ‘founding father’ to their respective organizations, it seemed unthinkable that someone else should lead their organizations. In remembering past and performing present, Pastor Lewis *was* Providing Hope and Matthew Barnett *was* the Dream Center.

I am not saying, though, that charisma was not part of what constituted them as leaders. Especially in Matthew Barnett’s case, having a winning personality probably helped when he spent most of his week travelling North America to give speeches in other churches and to raise money for running the Dream Center. Although Pentecostal congregations have distinct and easily identifiable leaders and followers, the picture might be more complicated than even Weber would have defined it.

## Summing up

Several of the points made in this chapter can contribute with possible explanations to the rapid growth of Pentecostalism worldwide. Although I have argued that charismatic leaders are not necessarily seen as supernaturally chosen to lead a congregation, there is no doubt that winning personalities often have the ability to attract someone to their organization or congregation, and not only religious ones. I would also assume that with the belief that anyone can attain spiritual gifts comes curiosity. If one already – like 70-80 % of the *total* US population, according to some surveys (Brown 2004) – believes that supernatural healing is possible, it might not be as far off to enter the denomination that can give you the ability to heal. The documentation practices analyzed in the beginning of this chapter, too, can also be a possible indirect reason so many convert to Pentecostalism – not only does it give believers a chance to ‘show what they are doing’ and attract curiosity, but their perceived entitlement to take pictures of marginalized people can underline power relations, the same power relations that may cause a receiver of benefits to reciprocate in the form of saying yes to being counted as a convert.



## Chapter 6: Concluding remarks

Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianities are considered the fastest growing religious denominations in the world. It is interesting to find out why, and this dissertation can be seen as a contribution to this field. This master thesis has focused on the lives of the volunteers and leaders in a small Pentecostal organization as well as a large megachurch and a social work- and rehabilitation institution in Los Angeles. Looking at how they organize their proselytizing, their social outreaches and their everyday religious lives, I have highlighted possible reasons for the spread and appeal of Pentecostal Christianity. Although my findings cannot represent Pentecostalism all over the world, the discoveries presented here can say something about how my informants performed their faith through evangelizing and social work, and how they by the help of this work were able to raise the number of converts.

If the research methods of the Pew research center (Pew Report 2011, p. 17) are the most common and the numbers of Pentecostal converts are provided by Pentecostal organizations themselves, the ‘lightness’ with which my informants counted new converts, can be a viable explanation for the spread of Pentecostalism. In chapter two, I showed how the discrepancy between my informants’ own salvation experiences and what they counted as salvations in other people made the reported numbers of converts relatively high. If this is the praxis elsewhere too, we have to question whether the nine million *counted* as converts to Pentecostalism worldwide yearly (Burgess 2006, p. xiii) would all define themselves as just that. Many people, especially those that are dependent on religious charity and that frequent or live on the streets, can be counted as converts multiple times, and many of those counted have far from enough information about what they are saying yes to, as I have showed.

However, it is highly unlikely that the answer to why the number of Pentecostals worldwide is so high is that simple. I do argue that a number of people are incorrectly considered converts, but seeing my informants’ enthusiasm, hearing their supernatural conversion and healing stories and experiencing the unity and corporal involvement they show in church, makes me disposed to claim that there is undoubtedly *something* about Pentecostal Christianity that appeals to a high number of people. In addition, those who are already saved employ different strategies to evangelize and spread their faith. In chapter two, I described how well-rehearsed,

repeated conversion narratives, often with supernatural elements, are used by Pentecostals both to save others and to reaffirm their own performance of faith.

Continuing the analysis of faith performances, I looked at how my informants knew their audience and adapted the way they expressed religion in chapter three. While speaking in tongues was only conducted in smaller, less public settings, prayer was central both in church, on the streets and in everyday life. In the same chapter, I showed how different homelessness discourses were visible in the way my informants viewed the marginalized people they met. The fact that many Pentecostal charity workers come from backgrounds similar to the people they target, is an important factor. So is the social benefit system in America; through the Faith-Based Initiative, much social work has been left to religious organizations, and marginalized people are often dependent on the help of these usually Christian organizations to get through the day. I have argued that gratitude and identification with benefactors and their pasts combined with a wish or need to reciprocate the gifts received (Mauss 2003) might be the reasons people on the streets agree to conversions again and again.

Going back to the performance of faith in chapter four, the focus has been on the belief in spiritual healing and the gift economy in charity work. Prayers of healing were usually combined with conventional medicine when someone got sick, but only God was credited when someone recovered, and only successful healing stories were reported. I suspect this entirely positive healing discourse contributes to making Pentecostalism appealing to ‘outsiders’, and along with the knowledge that anyone who has been saved can receive the spiritual gift of healing others it has the potential to attract new converts.

These different practices were often documented through taking pictures and publishing them on the internet, both to interest potential converts and to attract donors. Money was a prevalent theme in *Providing Hope* and through the distribution of finances, the charismatic authority of the organization’s leader became apparent. Still, I argue with Thomas Csordas (1997) that charisma can be spread throughout a Pentecostal congregation and potentially belong to every believer. Undoubtedly, though, a single charismatic and enthusiastic Pentecostal individual can be enough to attract a curious person to the faith.

There are two more factors that are important to keep in mind when explaining the increase of Pentecostal Christianity, though; especially in the American context I have studied them. First, that the United States of America is a highly religious society, and an overwhelming

majority of religious Americans adhere to some form of Christianity. All of the conversion narratives I was given came from people who had been either non-religious or belonging to a non-charismatic Christian denomination before converting to Pentecostalism. Although my informants would say that *their* faith with the personal relationship they claimed to have with Jesus was completely different from any other faith, it is likely that the crossover to Pentecostalism, to “voluntarily shift the basic presuppositions upon which both self and others are understood” as Buckser and Glazier describes conversion (2003, p. xi), can be simpler for those that have grown up in a society as Christian as America than for those that come from religions or cultures with completely different belief systems.

The second factor also has to do with simplicity; I am not saying that converts to Pentecostalism are less intelligent or that they have not thought their decision to convert through; rather, I want to point out how little effort the actual conversion takes. Once you have said the salvation prayer, where you repent of your sins and ask Jesus to come into your heart, you are saved. Pentecostals believe that by repeating a few lines, you are guaranteed access to Heaven no matter what you have done earlier in your life. They claim to go to Heaven *sola fide*, on faith alone, and I would argue that the accessibility of forgiveness, inclusion and a promise of eternal life in Heaven is attractive, probably especially to those living on the margins of society.

There were great individual differences to be found among my informants when it came to everything from their pasts and salvation narratives to views on sin and salvation techniques. Still, it appeared to me that their somewhat uncritical faith in God, and partially in charismatic authorities in church and in Christian life in general, enabled them to work together towards a joint goal; worldwide evangelism.

It is hard to predict the future for an organization as ever changing and loosely structured as Providing Hope, but one thing is fairly certain: they will not run out of people to help. The still difficult economic situation in America has left many, both individuals and families, jobless and even homeless. In addition, the climate will always make Southern California attractive to people that sleep outside, and the social system in the US that leaves most social work to faith-based organizations makes it easier to start and to maintain tax-exempt charity organizations. If Pastor Lewis’s goal for Providing Hope is to convert as many as possible to Pentecostalism, there is a fair chance he can continue to increase the numbers by his somewhat special counting systems. To say something about whether the spread of

Pentecostalism worldwide will continue I would have had to know a lot more about Pentecostalism elsewhere, but I do believe that as long as there are people that need something they feel none other than a supernatural creator can give them, there will always be some turning to religion in general, and Pentecostal Christianity in particular. Aided by numerous factors, both related to their own practices for saving and counting people and to larger societal structures like poverty and religious tolerance, my informants did achieve their goal of both feeding people and spreading the Gospel.

Since the majority of anthropological research done on Pentecostalism concerns Africa, Latin America and the Pacific, I would say that there is a need for more research on the field of Pentecostalism in the western world. Both urban and rural congregations should be analyzed, and in America it would be particularly interesting to look at what the Faith-Based Initiative combined with the increase in the number of socially marginalized will do with people's religious belonging. Will more people need social services from faith-based organizations, and are there any particular denominations that will see an increase in converts? Will Pentecostalism in the United States spread even more if poverty and unemployment prevails? There are, of course, a multitude of causes at play when someone chooses to adopt a new religion or change their existing one, and I am sure I have only scratched the surface when it comes to explaining why so many turn to Pentecostalism. Still I hope that some of the motivations, performances and practices I have identified and analyzed here can contribute to a broader field of research on the spread of faith.



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