

## “Man Looks at the Outward Appearance, God Looks at the Heart”: Inclusion and Identity in a High Boundary Religion

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*In this case study, we bring together literatures on identity and culture to examine the boundary work taking place within the United Pentecostal Church International (UPCI), a historically conservative denomination with a fundamentalist orientation toward Christian belief and practice. Our findings demonstrate that boundaries are subject to deviation—and even intentional alteration—at the local level. We introduce the concept of “self-effacing boundary work” to describe a strategy that deemphasizes exclusionary group practices and beliefs while simultaneously seeking to retain a unique group identity. Organizational leaders and idioculture play key roles in this process.*

**Keywords:** boundaries, identity, culture, high boundary groups, religious institutional entrepreneurs, interactionism

We wholeheartedly disapprove of our people indulging in any activities which are not conducive to good Christianity and godly living, such as theaters, dances, mixed bathing or swimming, women cutting their hair, make-up, any apparel that immodestly exposes the body, all worldly sports and amusements, and unwholesome radio programs and music. Furthermore, because of the display of all these evils on television, we disapprove of any of our people having television sets in their homes. We admonish all of our people to refrain from any of these practices in the interest of spiritual progress and the soon coming of the Lord for His church. (United Pentecostal Church International Manual 2017:36)

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## INTRODUCTION

The above quote, taken directly from a recent denominational publication, provides clear and rigid guidelines demarcating acceptable and unacceptable behavior for members of the Apostolic church. Apostolic Christians represent a subcultural identity within the broader Conservative Protestant movement. The United Pentecostal Church International (UPCI) is a historically conservative denomination with a fundamentalist orientation that seeks to align with the teachings of the first century Christian apostles. As such, their beliefs, teachings, and religious practice create high boundaries between those within the faith and those on the outside. Guidelines like those quoted above seem to demonstrate a collection of beliefs that are exclusionary and absolute, and a group of believers that are distinctly and intentionally “out of step” with the broader culture. In this context, it is reasonable to assume that local Apostolic congregations affiliated with the broader denomination would routinely focus considerable energy on maintaining and reinforcing these high boundaries — for such boundaries serve as a central feature of the Apostolic identity.

However, there is reason to question this assumption. Specifically, prior research in the sociology of religion has consistently demonstrated that even when they may appear at first glance to be so, religious traditions and organizations are not monolithic. Church teachings and practices, as well as the individual and collective beliefs of members, exhibit remarkable variation — both within denominations and between congregations. This variation can, at times, result in an apparent disconnect between local practice and denominational teachings. What causes this? What processes lead to this disconnect? What role do leadership and culture play in managing religious boundaries and identities?

In this article, we provide a partial answer to these questions by focusing on culture and the interactions of people within organizations. It is through interactions that group boundaries are created and negotiated, where ideas of who “we” are and who “they” are get forged, and how congregations come to be situated within denominations and the broader society. This multi-level process of boundary work and identity formation can be revealed by examining congregational cultures.

Culture is grounded interaction (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Fine 2006). Therefore, in order to understand the *how* of religious identity and congregational culture, it is advantageous to examine interaction within a specific context — for our purposes, a single congregation. Our examination of Forest Hill<sup>1</sup> is revealing in multiple ways. First, although affiliated with a branch of Conservative Protestantism known for strict teachings and high boundaries, this congregation engages in “self-effacing boundary work” designed to minimize negative and exclusionary aspects of boundary maintenance. Second, this practice represents an important component of the localized church culture seeking to simultaneously maintain distinctions and engage more directly with mainstream culture. Third, these efforts

have been spearheaded by a pastor acting as an institutional entrepreneur seeking to redefine what it means to be Apostolic and broaden the appeal of this high boundary form of Christianity.

## BOUNDARIES, IDENTITY, AND RELIGION

Symbolic boundaries demarcate the borders between “us” and “them” and generate feelings of belonging in a group. At its core, the study of boundaries is the study of meaning making processes and how people make sense of themselves and others, structuring and ordering identities and their associated beliefs and practices. Thus, the symbolic boundaries that define the distinguishing characteristics of groups simultaneously define group identities and institutions.

Identity work and boundary work are inexorably linked to one another as groups work to define and distinguish themselves (Austin and Fitzgerald 2018; Riesch 2010). The inquiry into the construction and maintenance of the boundaries and religious institutions that define groups and hold them together can be traced back to Durkheim’s ([1912] 1954) discussion of the sacred and profane. The structuring and organizing activities and meanings within the group result in a cosmology for group members and are tied to rituals and practices that define the identity of the group (Lamont et al. 2015). The development of symbolic and behavioral systems holds groups together by defining who they are and objectifying social differences marking group membership.

Denominations can have an especially influential effect on identity formation and the drawing of symbolic boundaries around legitimate religious identity (Roozen 2005). Religious denominations have distinct subcultural identities (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996; Smith et al. 1998) created through institutionalized meaning systems and practices that demarcate the boundaries between themselves and others. Even religious groups operating under the same superordinate identities — such as “Christian” — will craft unique subcultural identities that create finer distinctions between themselves and other groups (Armet 2009; Smith et al. 1998). Empirically, these differentiation processes can be identified in both the discursive and organizational practices of communities.

In addition, religious boundaries are neither static nor impermeable. Bok (2014) identifies the “symbolic filtering” of missionaries tasked with converting people in new and foreign places as they negotiate the boundaries of Christian identity by contextualizing the Christian message while attempting to maintain its core elements. By doing so they engage in a strategy of accommodation, or boundary blurring, in which they “cognitively allow various elements to pass through their symbolic boundaries” (2014:811). Christian Smith et al. (1998:100) notes, “religious traditions have always strategically renegotiated their collective identities by continually reformulating the ways their constructed orthodoxies engage with the changing sociocultural environments they confront.” Congregations and other religious organizations can adapt rituals to blur the boundaries between members and non-members in an attempt

to attract those who had a distaste for organized religion (Edgell and Robey 2016; Wagner 1990).

These studies demonstrate how religious traditions and “boundary agents” can strengthen or weaken symbolic and social boundaries in response to changing conditions or desired goals. As is the case with other types of boundary work, religious boundaries are shaped by the context and specific cultural materials and meaning systems that are available and become more or less permeable in different contexts (Lamont and Molnar 2002; Pachucki et al. 2007). In this article, we explore this process by examining the boundary work taking place within a single congregation — one that is a part of a conservative religious tradition with high boundaries.

High boundary religious groups have stringent requirements for entry and continued membership resulting in a high degree of encapsulation (Armet 2009; Greil and Rudy 1984). Considerable effort goes toward delineating who is “in” and who is “outside” the group. Yet, in some high boundary groups, we see an ongoing negotiation and expansion of the boundaries that demarcate membership. As we demonstrate below, religious denominations are not monolithic and by focusing on interactions between local leaders and members, we reveal nuanced and varied collective identity work even within high boundary groups.

Involvement in religious activities serves as an ongoing context, producing schematic understandings about the nature of the world and normatively appropriate behaviors (Fitzgerald and Glass 2014). These schemas (Sewell 1992; Swidler 1986) provide the scripts and worldviews used to navigate daily life. Within a religious context, these schemas integrate and blend moral prescriptions with understandings of appropriate behavior and group identity. Schemas provide a link between symbolic and strategic action. For example, Swidler (2001:82) identifies “strategies of action,” which are “general solutions to the problem of how to organize action over time, rather than specific ways of attaining particular ends.” In other words, actions are guided by broader moral understanding and are linked to symbolic meanings, which in turn serve as the basis for group boundaries and identities. While this process is not unique to high boundary groups, it is revealing to examine interactions within high boundary groups — such as Forest Hill — in order to understand the *how* of identity and boundary work.

Organizational leaders play an important role in developing and shaping the patterns of group interactions and can introduce new techniques or understandings that alter existing patterns. As we discuss further below, it is through the creation of an idioculture,<sup>2</sup> shaped by a strong group leader that Forest Hill engages in “self-effacing boundary work.” This form of boundary work represents a key element of the unique idioculture of Forest Hill and this localized church culture diverges, in practice and belief, from broader denominational teachings and guidance. Of course, local practices and denominational ideals are rarely perfectly coupled; the degree of correspondence is influenced by both institutional regulation and local norms. As an inevitable artifact of the creativity and agency of religious actors, some variation in values, beliefs, and practices is to be expected within denominations and local congregations,

and between individuals in everyday life (Ammerman 2007; Marti 2015). As our findings indicate, organizational leaders and idioculture play important roles in this process.

## DATA AND METHODS

Our data come from a case study of a congregation located in a large metropolitan area in the Southeast region of the United States. “Forest Hill” is a member of the UPCI, a historically conservative denomination with a fundamentalist orientation toward the belief and practice of the Christian faith that seeks to align with the teachings of the first century Christian apostles. Studying the UPCI in the 1970s, Dearman (1974:440) determined that their unique system of beliefs “gives them a feeling of identity with a group which claims to have discovered the absolutely ‘true way’” and represents a high-boundary group. As our analysis below of contemporary denominational statements and literature demonstrate the categorization of UCPI as a high-boundary group in society remains accurate in the current period.

Forest Hill is a congregation with 300–350 regular attendees at two Sunday morning services. It also has Wednesday night services as well as several small groups and other community activities. During 2016–17, the first author engaged in nine months of participant observation, which included attending Sunday morning worship services, a new members’ class series conducted by Pastor Daniel, a non-church sponsored event with members, and occasional Wednesday night services. In total, more than 40 worship services and events were observed. Fieldnotes were written in a notebook while at services and events, with the researcher often sitting in the back during services so as not to be disruptive. These notes were later typed up and additional commentary related to emerging themes was added.

In addition, the first author conducted ten semi-structured interviews with congregation members. The interviewees included five men (three white, one black, one Hispanic) and five women (three white, one black, one Hispanic). The sample was collected through a combination of convenience and snowball sampling methods and approximates the racial and gender composition of the congregation. While we do not claim the interviewees are representative of a broader population (e.g., the congregation or denomination), the inclusion of various voices does underscore our findings of common understandings and boundary work. The interview questions prompted conversations about each respondent’s conversion narrative, religious/collective identity, outgroups, beliefs, and practices. Interviews were recorded and lasted between one and two hours. Audio files were later transcribed and imported into the qualitative software program NVivo. Interview and fieldnote data were coded using open coding techniques (Emerson et al. 2011) to identify themes related to boundary and identity construction.<sup>3</sup>

We also examined official organizational documents of the UPCI to identify the boundaries and institutional logics set forth by the Apostolic Church constructing and defining what it means to be Apostolic Pentecostal. The UPCI is headquartered

in Weldon Spring, Missouri, and has its own publishing house, websites, university, minister training, and an annual conference at which all members of affiliated churches are encouraged to attend. Additional organizational documents included magazines, tracts, websites, and the 2017 UPCI Manual. The Manual contains, among other things, official articles of faith, the constitution, and position papers. These documents were first read using open coding techniques (Emerson et al. 2011) to identify themes related to boundary and identity construction. These themes were then further examined to identify specific beliefs and practices that operate as symbolic boundaries for the Apostolic Church.

While our analysis highlights Pastor Daniel as an institutional entrepreneur that was not the initial focus of the data collection. Originally, we set out to investigate the ways in which Christians from different traditions and communities understand their faith and religious identity. As part of that project, we sought to include a fundamentalist tradition in order to examine the process of boundary maintenance and an online search of congregations in the metropolitan area of focus led us to Forest Hill. Based on our prior knowledge of religious fundamentalism and boundaries we expected to find high and consistent boundaries and a congregation focused on maintaining and strengthening those boundaries. However, what emerged during the months of participant observation and data collection at Forest Hill was a more nuanced and complex interpretation of Apostolic Christianity identity than we initially anticipated. Our focus then shifted to understanding the disconnect between local practice and denominational teachings and the role of leadership and localized church cultures in this process.

Forest Hill represents an interesting case for the study of groups with high boundaries in that the pastor at Forest Hill, Pastor Daniel, aware of the need for their message to maintain relevance in a changing world, is attempting to generate a more inclusive community and message while maintaining core elements concerning what it means to be Apostolic. As a member of the UPCI, there are distinct values, beliefs, and practices that need to be upheld in order to maintain Apostolic-ness while simultaneously carving out space for including alternative ways of being Apostolic. But pushing the boundaries of core beliefs and practices that define Apostolic identity according to the organizational Church is not without opposition as churches and individuals with a traditional orientation still constitute a majority of the denomination as a whole. Pastor Daniel must balance the desire for a more inclusive identity and practices while being a part of a larger community that defines its identity more exclusively.

## BOUNDARIES AND IDENTITY

### Institutional High Boundaries of the UCPI

The Apostolic Church's official documents and teachings provide insight into the institutional definitions of what it means to make a legitimate claim on Christian

and Apostolic identity. The historically exclusive boundaries of the UPCI discussed above are also prevalent in the current denominational literature. Though these qualities are not exclusive to the UPCI, Apostolic Pentecostalism has a unique subcultural identity even among other Christian denominations, possessing a core set of beliefs and practices that are specific to their denominational identity. There are three defining characteristics that make Apostolic Pentecostals unique: their doctrine of Oneness (which is opposed to a Trinitarian view of the Godhead), their doctrine of salvation (which includes the necessity of baptism “in Jesus’ name” and the evidence of receiving the Holy Spirit by speaking in tongues), and the practice of the “holiness standards” (which are rules for a proper Christian lifestyle).

As one of the only denominations that adhere to these beliefs and practices (there are a small number of other “Oneness” organizations), the implication is that other forms and expressions of Christian faith do not align with the historic Christian faith and are, therefore, not legitimate. There are beliefs and practices one must adhere to not only be authentically Apostolic but authentically Christian as well. The Church’s view on salvation titled the “Fundamental Doctrine,” is prominently presented in official documents and church magazines. It reads as follows:

The basic and fundamental doctrine of this organization shall be the *Bible standard of full salvation*, which is repentance, baptism in water by immersion in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and the baptism of the Holy Ghost with the initial sign of speaking with other tongues as the Spirit gives utterance. We shall endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit until we all come into the unity of the faith, at the same time *admonishing all brethren that they shall not contend for their different views* to the disunity of the body. (UPCI Manual 2017:31; emphasis added)

This text draws a symbolic boundary between the Apostolic Church’s practices concerning salvation and others by legitimizing the Apostolic method as the proper method outlined by the Bible, referred to here as the “Bible standard.” It also cautions against holding alternative views concerning the issue. A text titled “The One True God,” which outlines the doctrine of Oneness, is also found at the beginning of publications and the doctrine has been given extensive treatment in a number of organizational tracts. The repeated emphasis on these doctrines reveals their symbolic importance to the Apostolic Church as these distinctions are heavily institutionalized in official organizational documents that construct Apostolic identity.

The final area of symbolic distinction for the Apostolic Church concerns the holiness standards. The holiness standards are lifestyle practices that members are expected to engage in and refrain from. These practices are rooted in the Holiness Movement of the early twentieth century, which was based on the idea that Christians should live “holy” lives that distinguish them from the rest of the world (Synan 1997). While some of the very traditional ideas that spawned from this movement are still practiced by some Christians outside the UPCI, there is only a small minority who do so, making this a symbolically distinct practice within Christianity at large.

The opening quote provides a vivid example of The Church's official stance and distinctively high boundaries of group membership. The disapproval of many activities and behaviors common in contemporary American society indicates that the Church is drawing a strong boundary concerning these practices. The path to embody legitimate Apostolic identity is to refrain from these activities. According to the Church, in order to be authentically Apostolic one must lead a lifestyle devoid of these practices. As alluded to in many of the practices listed above, an important component for holy living as defined by the Church are issues of modesty and the performance of gender. The majority of these specific practices such as not cutting hair and not wearing make-up or jewelry fall on women as the Church wants to "please God and represent our gender clearly and practically" (UPCI Manual 2017:36). Further explication of these issues outlines that "Our women wear skirts or dresses and do not wear pants." Taken together, the holiness standards are important practices and boundaries that signify Apostolic identity. These practices are highly institutionalized in the Apostolic community — embedded not only as rules but norms and cultural-cognitive beliefs as well (Scott 2013). Not only do these practices signify legitimate Apostolic identity but also imply that they are necessary for authentic Christian faith as disobeying them would place one outside of right Christian living.

The boundaries drawn by the Church are the official material from which an ideal-typical form of Apostolic identity is constructed. In these documents, the Church is defining what it means to be Apostolic and classifying who belongs to the category Apostolic by outlining what it means to make a claim on that identity. They outline, which beliefs and practices members of the Apostolic Church are to hold and embody. The belief in the doctrine of Oneness, the unique plan of salvation, and the practice of holiness standards are major symbolic distinctions that separate Apostolic faith and lifestyle from other groups and identities more broadly but also from other forms of Christianity as well. The exclusive and definitive language used in these documents implicitly suggests that alternative forms and expressions of Christian faith are not legitimate, or at least do not correctly follow the Bible's outline for a true Christian doctrine and lifestyle. This boundary and identity work done by the Church also constructs institutional logics systems of meaning and logics of action for its members to think with and adhere to. Some deviation from ideal-typical identities is a natural artifact of social life, but direct challenges to these logics — especially in a high boundary group — represent a separate social process worthy of further attention.

## CONGREGATIONAL CULTURE: PASTOR DANIEL AS INSTITUTIONAL ENTREPRENEUR

Boundaries scholars have long observed the importance of structural context in the shaping of boundaries and "particularly by the cultural repertoires, traditions, and narratives that individuals have access to" (Lamont and Molnar 2002:171).



Although organizational classification systems concerning membership are certainly not inconsequential in constructing boundaries and identity — indeed denominations are important agents of religious socialization (Sherkat 2003) — the repertoires, traditions, and narratives people have the most frequent contact with are developed at the interactional level. Discourse at the local, congregational level can have a major impact on the ways in which people define issues and construct boundaries and identities that may be decoupled from “official” discourse (Edgell 2003:177). Thus, in terms of organizational belonging, it is through interaction that people acquire the cultural tools to construct their identity as Apostolic. While in conversation with denominational definitions, the local congregational culture defines what beliefs, practices, and values are required or expected of local members. Many social dynamics at the congregational level contribute to its established systems of meanings, but one particularly influential actor in shaping the discourse and practice of the community is the pastor.

Even though the official denominational teachings espouse an exclusive identity that holds only those beliefs and practices sanctioned by the Church as authoritative, Pastor Daniel self-consciously questions the exclusive orientation of the Church through a discourse and practice of inclusion and acceptance that challenges existing institutions and advocates for personal choice in matters of faith over normative and regulative demands. Without delegitimizing fundamental aspects of Apostolic identity, he challenges congregants not to judge others both inside and outside the Church for how they construct their personal relationship with God. In doing this Pastor Daniel acts as an *institutional entrepreneur* (Marti 2017), attempting to redefine the identities, practices, and values of his congregants by stretching the boundaries imposed by the organizational Church. Marti’s (2017:14) examination of religious institutional entrepreneurs illuminates how “deconstructing and reframing beliefs, practices, and identities” can produce change. These actions are inherently boundary processes; institutional entrepreneurs redefine the boundaries of what is acceptable and deemed legitimate within a particular institutional field.

Pastor Daniel explains his approach as a response to postmodernity in which he sees a need to “reconcile the Gospel with the modern mind.” He contrasts this from the “change the modern mind” approach of the previous generations of UPCI pastors, including the former pastor of Forest Hill. While not on the level of Wuthnow’s (2005:143) “inclusive Christians” who take a pluralistic approach to religion by claiming that all forms of faith are legitimate, the discourse at Forest Hill routinely included themes of inclusion, acceptance of difference, and a preference for personal choice — all notable in a congregation of a high boundary group known for espousing comparatively narrow biblical interpretations and strict moral codes. Surprisingly, not only was discourse concerning boundaries set by the Church virtually nonexistent at the local level, there were many efforts to reduce emphasis on the importance of boundaries — particularly regarding the holiness standards.

Rather than focusing on differentiating the group and drawing boundaries around appropriate beliefs and practices, in his sermons, new member class teachings, and

interview, Pastor Daniel discussed themes of self-reflection and inclusion. His discourse focused heavily on the idea that, as individuals, members have the power and presence of God in their lives to see them through trying and difficult circumstances. This represents boundary work because a religious “other” is created to define the in-group and out-group (Yukich 2010). The “other” in this case is an imagined person or group who uses their faith to exclude others, tout their own righteousness, and/or live how they please without regard to how they affect others. The process of “othering” often reproduces social inequalities (Schwalbe et al. 2000) and creates only “conditional acceptance” of marginalized groups by dominant ones (Sumerau et al. 2017).

Pastor Daniel places little emphasis on organizational boundaries and typically blurs and expands the possibilities of what it means to be Apostolic and Christian. When leading the “new Christian” class he repeatedly mentioned that Forest Hill desires to be a church based on love, acceptance, and inclusion. He says they are not in the “business of division” but of bringing people together. Quoting Marx and Engels he also says they do not desire to be a “control mechanism for the masses” – a conscious nod to individual choice over institutional control. He also repeats themes of individual choice in one’s life of faith and champions “influence” by example rather than through social control or authoritative dictates. Pastor Daniel often returned to the theme of non-judgment and repeatedly reminded the congregation that *people* do not decide who is a good person, who loves God, or who is saved.

### Self-Effacing Boundary Work

The messages of inclusion discussed above connect to the practice of self-effacing boundary work, or reminders not to think of oneself or group as superior to others. This process has much in common with Shoshana’s (2007) “reverse boundary work” in which group members are encouraged to positively evaluate the characteristics of an outgroup and devalue characteristics of the in-group. However, rather than being encouraged to devalue any specific characteristics of the in-group in this case they are encouraged simply not to overvalue themselves or their group and also not to devalue others or other groups. Themes of self-reflection run through much of the public discourse at Forest Hill. Rather than spending time constructing the image of the group itself as positively distinct and superior to others as certain predictions of social identity theory might suggest (Tajfel and Turner 1986), the pastor attempts to create a group culture that is wary of perceiving itself as superior to others. The “other” is unnamed and not connected to any specific groups but operates as an imagined foil to get congregation members to reflect on their own thoughts and actions. This is commonly done by calling on the image of the Pharisees, antagonists to Jesus in the Gospel narratives who are portrayed as being concerned with rule following, being self-righteous and judgmental, and excluding others. In referencing a biblical story in which the Pharisees are about to stone a woman for committing adultery, the pastor says: “we want to be the people who drop the stone and say it’s not my place.”

Pastor Daniel also spoke of “tribalizing the Gospel” and the necessity of the church’s role to be an agent of reconciliation. In his discussion of tribalization, he points to people’s tendency — and specifically for “us fundamentalist preachers” — to condemn those they view as sinners using a “religious veneer.” He then goes on to cite a passage of scripture in which the apostle Paul “gives this tremendous list of transgressions and then says that the person who’s inexcusable is the one who judges these people.” In doing this he recognizes institutions of exclusion and self-aggrandizing within the group and seeks to reverse this tendency. In his series on reconciliation Pastor Daniel explored how the concept “applies to us in a local church.” He speaks of reconciliation as a coming together of people who “look different, think different, act different” and that the church’s testimony to the world is the manifestation of this type of reconciliation. He also goes on to say: “I’m scared of a church that looks like me, that votes like me, that thinks like me — that’s not reconciliation ... We’ve got to embrace, we’ve got to reconcile, we’ve got to have empathy, we need to be a place of inclusion.” As will be discussed below, this manifests itself at Forest Hill not only in macro level differences such as race and socioeconomic status but in different expressions of Apostolic identity itself. Themes of non-judgment and acceptance of difference were also located in a number of other pastoral discourses. While Pastor Daniel’s theology draws directly from scripture, his interpretations do not fit squarely with traditional UCPI teachings.

The practice of self-effacing boundary work seems to be part of a larger project of creating a more inclusive community at Forest Hill. Social exclusion follows symbolic exclusion, both of which are the products of boundary drawing (Lamont and Molnar 2002). By blurring the symbolic distinctions, or weakening the strength of symbolic boundaries that mark Apostolic identity, the definition of the category “Apostolic” becomes more expansive and able to include expressions outside of the official organizational boundaries at Forest Hill. Thus, in reducing symbolic exclusion it simultaneously increases social inclusion. One interviewee, Edward (Hispanic, male), described his first experience with an Apostolic church in California where he recalls thinking, “Man, I’m not even baptized yet, why are you telling me what kind of pants I can wear?” Forest Hill tries to create a community in which people are accepted wherever they are at in their faith without rigidly enforcing the identity boundaries of the Church. Rather than being requirements for membership in the group, some official Church boundaries such as the holiness standards are framed as “matters of the heart” based on an individual’s personal relationship with God. Using this logic, membership in the community is not based on a binary logic of residing on one side of the boundary or the other but placed on a continuum.

Pentecostal girls go by what the Bible-, how the women carry themselves and what God really wants is how you identify to be a woman of God. Basically, His dress codes. I go by His Bible’s dress codes. You know how like in work they’re always tell you: “Dress suits” or “Wear skirts” or “Wear just black” or “Dress casual or dressy”? So I go by His. So I always feel like I represent Him. (Carla, Hispanic female)

Another member talks about what led to her decision to wear only skirts:

When I got filled with the holy spirit the desire came to be a certain way for the Lord. To present myself to my God and my king, my Father in a certain way which is quite different from when I was living my life, you know, for my own agenda. But this time it's not for my own, it's to please God, so that's where the distinctions are in terms of our daily walk. (Crystal, black female)

Unlike denominational events and conferences, where Linda (white female) says they go into “tremendous detail of why it's essential for a woman to [follow the standards],” the only public discussion of this issue observed during the participant observation was during the newcomer's class.

Contrary to an exposition on the essential nature of this and other holiness practices, Pastor Daniel recognizes that the holiness standards are often used as a form of “exclusion” and reassures people that everyone is welcome in their community. He estimates that about a third of the congregation follows all the holiness standards, a third follow many, and a third follow some but wants “everyone to know they have a place here.” Instead of applying the standards as impermeable boundaries that constitute inclusion or exclusion in the community, he reframes them as matters of the heart that does not determine how good a person is or how much they love God. He encourages people to adopt these if they are personally meaningful in their relationship to God, not because they are following someone else's rules, saying that it “has to be your worship, then it's beautiful.” In the new members' class as well as in many sermons given during the time of the fieldwork, Pastor Daniel consistently echoed the sentiment that “man looks at the outward appearance, God looks at the heart.” In doing so he blurs the boundaries around Apostolic identity by symbolically and socially including people in the community even if they reside outside of the Church's official boundaries concerning the practice of the holiness standards. Andy (white male) draws a direct connection between congregants' understandings of their church and Pastor Daniel's preaching about being an inclusive community:

The congregation starts to pick it up, it's weird, it's almost like it's automatic. It's not because the pastor's preaching on it over and over again but, ya know, its almost like the church people decided to be that way themselves. Really, I think that the pastor's influencing through preaching and - pastor does a really good job about preaching love people, ya know, love people. Love 'em despite their differences ...

Through this type of boundary work members are encouraged to critically reexamine how they evaluate the goodness of both themselves and others. This potentially softens negative moral evaluations and weakens the relative strength of boundaries between the self or the group and others. Thus, these themes can be viewed as a strategy used by Pastor Daniel to alter institutions of exclusion, recast certain elements of Apostolic identity, and redefine the boundaries of the community.

Changing institutionalized practices and/or beliefs requires that the proposed changes be legitimized (Marti 2017). One strategy is to draw on existing cultural

tools available to the community to justify changes and provide a supporting logic for such changes. Pastor Daniel draws on various biblical metaphors and passages to provide a justifying logic as to why previous modes of structuring community and practice created a culture of exclusion in the Apostolic Church that is antithetical to their calling as Christians. From this he argues that Christian community should be one of inclusion, love, and diversity and draws on broader cultural logics of inclusion and personalism to argue that it is an individual's personal relationship with God—not the regulative and normative institutions of the church—that is the true measure of their faith. He does this by engaging in self-effacing boundary work as a strategy to rearrange the institutions and collective identity of Forest Hill through emphasis on individual choice and inclusion of those who do not adhere to traditional forms of Apostolicism. At the same time, by deemphasizing distinctions and group superiority, Pastor Daniel creates a space for traditional beliefs and practices and celebrates them as providing many congregants with meaningful encounters with the divine.

#### Forest Hill's Idioculture: Evidence of Pastor Daniel's Influence

When discussing his overall philosophy on Christianity, Thomas (white male) offers the following reflection that specifically connects ideas of self-reflection to the pastor's preaching:

Stay humble, give back, love others, trust God, don't judge. Don't judge. I mean if you look at just Jesus and how much time he spent, he spent a lot of time with the Pharisees and the Sadducees, the religious people. And I think a lot of religion, they read that and say, yep, that's exactly right, in our world, you know, [the Pharisees are] the Lutherans and the Catholics and this or that. They don't even look in their own house or vice versa, the Catholics say that's the Pentecostals or that's them folks. They don't ever say what if he's talking to me. Do I have the mirror up? Turn the mirror. I think Pastor Daniel's preaching has been big time on that.

Carla (Hispanic female) also echoes sentiments of the need for humility and a self-critical approach to the group saying, "I don't consider myself better, or holier, or 'I'm a Christian' ... because you never know, God could come and be like: 'Your church was bad. You're not going.'" Rather than discussing why the Apostolic Church has a monopoly on truth, Thomas and Carla both express the need to not imagine their group as superior to others and to reflect on the possibility that they may not have it all figured out.

Several respondents discussed differences between how they thought in the past or while in different congregations and how they think now. Many of these differences reflect a previously taken for granted way of viewing the world about what is right or necessary concerning what it meant to be Christian. Many respondents now take a more reflective approach to their previously taken for granted assumptions. Recalling how she was trained to think in her previous congregation and how Pastor Daniel's preaching has influenced her, Linda says:

Pastor has had this whole judgment series going on — justice, I should say — and it's been speaking to me so much because that had been a huge part of my personality just because we were taught to call black black and white white ... And so I'm finding out that is not the way that the early church as Christians operated, not the healthy ones at least. And so I'm still learning and I'm finding it fascinating all of the things that I've missed over the years ... Whereas before I literally — it's so arrogant — I remember thinking I know all the stories in the Bible, so I know all there is to know.

Certainly, themes of self-reflection at the individual level could simply be the result of individual differences in the private lives of respondents or interview effects. However, the explicit connection many respondents made to Pastor Daniel's preaching lends support to the view that pastoral discourse plays a role in how individuals conduct boundary work and how institutions are being altered in both public and private discourse and practice. At the very least, this pastoral discourse contributes to an idioculture where this type of talk is legitimated by local authority — possibly one of the first steps to larger scale institutional change. At Forest Hill, questioning the superiority of one's traditions and ways of thinking does not devalue or undermine one's faith but is intended to keep members from being "Pharisees" and thinking that one has it "all figured out."

As discussed above, respondents often blurred the exclusive boundaries constructed at the organizational level and engaged in a discourse of inclusion. A discourse of personalism that created space for people to have different levels of commitment or modes of practice was also present. While growing up in an environment that strictly followed the standards, Thomas now has a different take on their necessity and importance:

While I grew up in a very traditional what I'd call practice of standards, things to do, I don't - I don't put myself over in that category to that level. And my philosophy, right or wrong, is I believe what's in the heart is most important and God made all of us unique.

Later he goes on to that his approach is not always received well by other Apostolics: "As you can tell, I'm not lock step in line with what I'd say are very traditional holiness Pentecostal people. And some of them would say about me, 'You've strayed outside the fence.' I've had them say it." Thomas reports that it is not an attitude that is universal among all Apostolics, however, this philosophy of personalism is given support in the public discourse at Forest Hill as well as among other respondents. Further supporting ideas about personalism and the importance of not socially excluding those who do not adhere to all the rules, Josh (black male), a young lay leader of college students, says:

So, there are different levels of commitment in Christianity and, from my perspective, that's okay. That's okay. We're not gonna push people away cause they're not on the field. But there are people that do do that. But like I said, for the most part, I haven't seen that in many many years.

Themes of respecting difference and inclusion were not only concerning differences within Apostolic communities, but between Apostolics and other Christians as well. Respondents not only blurred boundaries around what is meant to be authentically Apostolic concerning the holiness standards, but also salvation and what it means to be authentically Christian. Expanding the possibility of being authentically Christian outside of the Apostolic identity blurs the boundaries set by the Church. Echoing themes of love and the importance of personal relationship, John (white male) says this about division between denominations:

I think we fail by dividing us by denomination. We all have a relationship ... Being Apostolic [we are] trying to live by the example of the Word. And others can say that too. So it's a real fine respect. It's just being careful of putting division but never forsaking loving thy neighbor ... we are all a melting pot that God loves and respecting people's differences ... not that they are right or wrong but that's simply where they're at.

Not only did respondents show a respect for difference outside of the Apostolic Church, some also symbolically included them by suggesting their authenticity as Christians. This inclusion reflected themes of God as judge and personalism as grounds for having an authentic relationship with God. Thomas says of being authentically Christian: "Tell me about your life. Give me a snapshot of a month following you around and I'll tell you if you're a Christian or I won't tell you, but God will let you know." Speaking on her expectations of who will receive salvation, Linda says:

I used to think that heaven was going to look like a UPC church ... Then I got to a point where I thought: "Okay, well, it's going to be a bit broader than that." I now feel like it's going to be much more broad in terms of God is the judge, I'm not the judge ... what I now see is there is much more flexibility and room for other people to be grafted into the body of Christ than just my one group of- that I've had experience with. Other people are getting it right too ... the things that certain Oneness Apostolic churches teach is a very, very, very, very narrow path. I feel much more narrow than what even God is saying.

Speaking of actual, rather than abstract, people she knows outside of the Apostolic church, Cindy (white female) says:

I just feel like I've met other people that I know are Spirit-filled that don't go to a Pentecostal church, the same kind that I went to. I feel like that can be a false sense of comfort for some people: I feel like this is truth, so I go to this church, and I'm covered. I feel like, just because you go to an Apostolic church, that's not your ticket to heaven.

While it is likely there is great variation in people's response to this topic throughout the congregation, the presence of discussing the possibility of authentic Christianity outside the Apostolic Church at all demonstrates that at least some members of Forest Hill are comfortable deviating from the exclusive official stance and they

use themes of Pastor Daniel's self-reflection to do so. Linda's inclusion of others in authentic Christian identity may be broader, but both these comments certainly mark a deviation from the established organizational boundaries concerning how one receives the Holy Spirit. Together these quotes demonstrate strategies of boundary blurring conducted by congregation members in their everyday definitions of Apostolic and Christian identity.

Congregants acknowledge that even within the Apostolic church there are different approaches to negotiating the boundaries around what it means to be Apostolic. Interviews and conversations with congregants and leaders during the field work revealed that expression of Apostolic identity and the enforcement of official organizational boundaries varies over time and space. Forest Hill does not seem to typify the average Apostolic congregation. This supports scholarship that suggests that context matters in how identity is constructed and boundaries are drawn (Lamont and Molnar 2002), particularly in religious contexts (Ammerman 2003). This case demonstrates this to be true even in high boundary religious groups, and that intentional innovation may account for some of those differences. Several congregants expressed this reality by making a conservative–liberal distinction between churches within the denomination itself. As Linda indicates in the following quote, the “liberal” churches by her assessment, as well as expressed by others, are in the minority:

[The standards have] to do with how you look on the outside. And those are the ones that people can see. So inward stuff is also taught, but it depends on where you go. It depends on what church you visit. So, as you know, there are many, many Oneness Apostolic organizations that fellowship together. But for the conservative majority, and I say conservative meaning not like in few, they're the majority of people that are conservative in their beliefs, they teach much more specifically on the outward and following signs on the outside that look a certain part.

Forest Hill is located on the liberal end of this spectrum as several other congregants suggested. Thomas recalls his childhood church saying, “In the heat of the summer when it's 105 degrees playing softball or volleyball out in the yard, I'd be in hot sweaty jeans ... the approach I take today is if it's 105 degrees, I'm going to be wearing some shorts.” Similarly, speaking of the first Apostolic congregation he attended, Edward recalls: “When I first started going to church I only wore long sleeve shirts, I had no facial hair, I didn't have long hair, and I dressed in a white shirt and a tie almost every day.” He also recounts witnessing church members going to the beach “with slacks on” in the 100° heat. He goes on to say that Forest Hill is not this way and has experienced numerical growth since Pastor Daniel took over, unlike churches who have continued in the conservative vein. He believes, at least as advocated for at Forest Hill, the Church is starting to see that “we have to love these people because that's what's gonna bring them back, not all these laws about this, that, and the other.” Andy expands on this by addressing not only spatial differences but temporal and contextual ones as well:

I think there's definitely a uniqueness to the lifestyle. Nowadays it doesn't seem to be quite as predominant. But I think it's still echoed and preached a lot, especially



at conferences and stuff like that. But, generally speaking, Apostolic Pentecostals have a standard of holiness that's preached in some manner, shape, form . . . but at the same time, nowadays, I know a lot, a lot of people that, they're gonna go watch football after church, they don't see much problem with that. And nowadays this circle, while they still kind of preach it, the main idea more is if it's in your heart to not watch anything on TV, well God bless you, don't watch anything on TV. But if you wanna go watch football game, God bless you. Use good sense.

As Andy notes in the quote above, denominational conferences serve as a ritual that reaffirms the collective identity of the group that closely aligns with the official institutional boundaries (Hermanowicz and Morgan 1999). Linda explains how in the congregation she grew up in she was taught that they had “full truth” and everyone else had “half-truths” but has since called into question this type of thinking. She also notes that her new way of thinking has caused disagreements and conflict between herself and members of her childhood congregation, which remains a small, insulated community. As Edward's experience with his first church demonstrates, other congregations draw strong boundaries around practices in addition to beliefs. However, this does not seem to be the model at Forest Hill where the collective identity that is ritually reaffirmed is one that advocates for a culture of inclusion that expands official Church boundaries.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, we examine the processes of boundary construction and maintenance within a high boundary organization. The official documents and teachings of the UCPI create significantly high boundaries for Apostolic Christian identity. However, in certain contexts, these boundaries can be altered. At Forest Hill, an idioculture that encourages self-reflection and engagement encourages a more expansive and permeable set of boundaries. Acting as an institutional entrepreneur Pastor Daniel seeks to redefine what it means to be Apostolic and broaden the appeal of this high boundary form of Christianity. Promoting “self-effacing boundary work” designed to minimize negative and exclusionary aspects of boundary maintenance simultaneously maintains distinctions and engages more directly with mainstream culture.

It is through interactions that group boundaries and collective identities are negotiated, where notions of who “we” are and who “they” get forged. Often these distinctions can become the symbolic material used to discursively legitimate the beliefs and practices of the in-group while delegitimizing those of out-groups and also form the basis for social inclusion or exclusion. Our findings demonstrate that the organizational construction of symbolic and social boundaries is subject to deviations — and even intentional alterations — at the local level. Examining the intentional alteration of these institutionally embedded logics gives insight into how key actors at the local level can alter the symbolic and social boundaries of communities. In altering the symbolic and social boundaries of the group Pastor Daniel redefines local institutions and definitions of Apostolic identity. Guided in part by a desire to maintain

relevance in a changing world, Pastor Daniel seeks to generate a more inclusive community and message while maintaining core elements concerning what it means to be Apostolic. However, this boundary work around core beliefs and practices that define Apostolic identity is not without opposition, as churches and individuals with a traditional orientation still constitute a majority of the denomination as a whole. By encouraging self-effacing boundary work, Pastor Daniel contributes to an idioculture at Forest Hill that promotes inclusion of those who do not adhere to traditional forms of Apostolicism.

The specific context in which the Forest Hill congregation, and UCPI more broadly, are operating provides further insight into Pastor Daniel's approach. Under the tenure of the previous pastor — a traditional, “high boundary” oriented leader — the congregation saw numerical decline. Pastor Daniel diagnosed part of the issue as a resistance to accommodate changing attitudes in society at large and as he shifted his focus and preaching to be more inclusive, the number of congregants increase. The general idea is to reinterpret the Gospel in light of changing conditions rather than to continue trying to move forward with a pre-packaged interpretation that is becoming exceedingly distant from a modern lifestyle. Pastor Daniel's efforts to “reconcile the Gospel with the modern mind” rather than “change the modern mind” suggests elements of an Evangelical rather than fundamentalist approach to ministry.

Within the broad category of Conservative Protestants there are distinct traditions and subcultural identities (Darnell and Sherkat 1997; Roof and McKinney 1987; Smith et al. 1998). Fundamentalists have a strong separatist history rooted in antimodernist views developed in the early twentieth century (Ammerman 1987; Marsden 1980), which encourages disengagement with dominant, secular institutions (Sikkink 1999). The UCPI and other fundamentalist branches of Conservative Protestantism resist attempts to modify or expand definitions. The Evangelical movement, in contrast, advocates an engaged theology that encourages members to engage with the broader society and to transform institutions from within (Lindsay 2007; Marsden 1980; Sikkink 1999). The “distinctive engagement” of American Evangelicals (Smith et al. 1998) sometimes involves the broadening of symbolic boundaries but can also be pursued through outreach efforts that maintain exclusive and high boundaries.

Pastor Daniel's approach to accommodating more individualized understandings of Apostolicism fits with broader trends in religion showing, across denominations, more pluralistic and privatized forms of faith (Roozen 2005). The locus of power at Forest Hill under Pastor Daniel is shifting further away from the church as the definer of congregants' religious identity and more toward the individual making their own determinations about which aspects of the tradition are good and necessary for their own relationship with God. Instead of enforcing a definition (e.g., changing the modern mind), Pastor Daniel is opening definitions (e.g., reconcile the Gospel with the modern mind) to accommodate a more privatized version of religious identity.

Under Pastor Daniel's leadership, the congregation seems to celebrate traditional aspects of Apostolicism, while also treating them as just that — traditions. Within the formal guidelines and teachings of the UCPI these are viewed and practiced as *rules* governing and substantiating the boundaries of the community. However, Pastor Daniel treats them more as communal traditions that can have a powerful and good impact on the life of an individual believer, but the self-effacing dynamic emerges when he downplays those traditions as *necessary* for a successful relationship with God and/or for belonging in the community.

As discussed above, many of the holiness standards, guidelines, and practices are gendered. The specific standards of modesty, particularly for women, are an example of the importance of gender in the lived experience of religion (Bartkowski 2001; Gallagher 2003; Griffith 1997). Particularly in conservative religious traditions, gender often serves as a “sacred partition that creates parallel religious worlds” (Brasher 1998:4). At Forest Hill, while some of these standards are still widely practiced, especially in communal settings, other congregants are more flexible in their own daily life (e.g., women wearing jeans, men wearing sorts) and/or are largely accepting of those who chose not to strictly adhere to the standards. While our analysis focused broadly on the boundaries of Forest Hill's Apostolic identity, future analyses should examine how Apostolic identity relates to the intersections of gender, race, and class (Bartkowski 2004; Gallagher 2003). Further, these identities are linked to schemas and understandings of family life that have implications for a variety of social and economic outcomes (Bartkowski 2001; Fitzgerald and Glass 2008, 2012; Griffith 1997).

Taken together, our findings provide insight into how key actors can potentially change religious institutions by conducting boundary work that expands the definition of what it means to be Apostolic Christian by altering existing values, beliefs, and practices. While Marti (2017) focused on a loose network that explicitly values pluralism and inclusion, our study takes the concept of institutional entrepreneurs and applies it to a high boundary religious group with a centralized organizational structure and a distinct religious identity, demonstrating the concept's utility in contexts outside of movements specifically oriented toward inclusion and change.

Riesch (2010) argues that studying how boundary work is conducted in the real world can help further research in the social identity tradition. In the minds of members, symbolic boundaries create the “positive distinctiveness” posited by social identity scholars that seeks to advocate for the superiority of the in-group over others by endowing the group with special characteristics (Tajfel and Turner 1979). It is undeniable that groups often seek to positively distinguish characteristics of the in-group and emphasize negative characteristics of outgroups — even among the most inclusive of groups (Yukich 2010). However, our study demonstrates that groups can also engage in attempts to downplay difference and reduce negative attitudes toward those not like them based on values like pluralism. In this case, this type of boundary work is an attempt to alter existing institutions of exclusion and redefine group identity as inclusive. This self-effacing work and push toward inclusion can be partially

understood as a response to the changing conditions of modernity. Pastor Daniel sees such change as essential for the vitality of the tradition. The question of whether to expand the boundaries of religious identity to potentially bring more people under the “sacred canopy” (Berger 1967 2011) is a perennial one within religious denominations and traditions (Smith et al. 1998; Wagner 1990).

Though we focus our analysis on inclusion and boundary blurring, we do not suggest that exclusive boundary processes were not also at play in Forest Hill or that all members unquestioningly follow Pastor Daniel’s direction either in the past or present. We acknowledge that participants may have downplayed or concealed exclusionary practices and beliefs from us during interviews and interactions. By supplementing our interviews with participation observation of many different congregational activities and an analysis of organizational documents we reduce, but do not eliminate, this possibility. Further, given the timeframe of our study, we are not able to assess whether Pastor Daniel’s efforts produce long-lasting change in the congregation or denomination. Our findings clearly support the idea that boundary work is not only exclusive and self-aggrandizing in nature but can also be comprised of accommodation (Bok 2014) and unfavorable in-group evaluations (Shoshana 2007). As Bok (2014:822) notes, “symbolic filtering . . . enables boundary agents to cope within a religiously pluralistic environment without compromising on their core beliefs.”

By making distinctions between groups, boundaries may reinforce structural inequities in many ways. Even in situations where group boundaries are permeable or blurred, acceptance of the other can remain a “conditional acceptance” that does not fundamentally alter these social relations (Sumerau et al. 2017). Future work will benefit from comparative studies of congregations within the same denomination (see Moon 2004) with a focus on boundary and identity process as well as the entrepreneurial efforts of those advocating for change within. Whereas we employed our data to examine the idioculture of Forest Hill — focusing on congregational-level boundary work and interactions — our data could also be used to focus on individual members of the congregation and how their personal practices, beliefs, and schemas connect to their own identity.

In addition, interactionist analyses of *non-religious* high boundary groups will likely yield similar findings that could further illuminate the generic mechanisms guiding these processes. Along with their behavioral correlates, “symbolic systems — rules, norms, and cultural-cognitive beliefs — are central ingredients of institutions” (Scott 2013:57). Thus, the concept of boundaries can help scholars better understand how institutions and identities are constructed, maintained, and/or changed at different levels (Lamont and Molnar 2002). Ultimately, studying boundary and identity process can help scholars better understand localized culture, institutional entrepreneurship, and social change.

## NOTES

1. Aliases are used for the congregation and interview data to preserve anonymity.

2. “Idioculture ... signifies a system of knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, and customs shared by members of an interacting group to which members can refer and serves as the basis for further interaction. Members recognize that they share experiences, and these experiences can be referred to with the expectation that they will be understood by other members” (Fine 2006:2).
3. The research project was guided by literatures on boundaries, identity, and the sociology of religion. That data collection techniques (e.g., semi-formal interviews and observations) were sensitized by the concepts of religious identity, outgroups, and lifestyle/morality. Data were coded in accordance with these concepts and refined to identify themes that emerged specific to the group being studied. Strong themes of deconstructive boundary work emerged as a general orientation of the community, through this coding and analysis, over an emphasis on boundary maintenance.

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