"More Than Conquerors" The Evangelical Kingdom Model at Work in One of America's Protestant Megachurches

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Honors Thesis

“MORE THAN CONQUERORS”
THE EVANGELICAL KINGDOM MODEL AT WORK IN ONE OF AMERICA’S
PROTESTANT MEGACHURCHES

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Abstract

Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted at 12Stone Church in Atlanta, Georgia, this report explores the strategies that 12Stone (like other evangelical megachurches) implements in order to grow and strengthen a church membership that consists of tens of thousands of members. The most prevalent of these strategies is the demographic-based rhetoric that 12Stone uses to draw in its main demographic, which is politically right-wing, white, Christian men. The rhetoric utilizes a doctrinal model that I refer to as the Evangelical Kingdom Model to impress upon members the evangelical mission and culture, the experience of which revolves around the local church level. At 12Stone, the strong, militaristic message of community targeted at politically conservative individuals effectively appeals to both their political and religious sensibilities in a way that reaffirms their commitment to 12Stone as a church.
Acknowledgements

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Lastly, I thank two very special people in my life. My Grandpa, Thomas Hill, passed away during the course of this fieldwork, and although his loss was difficult, his clear love for me helped remind me that he was so very proud of me for all the work I put into this project and everything else in life. His wife, my Nana (Phyllis Hill), has never failed to be an example to me of strength and love. I love you Nana.
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Introduction

Across the United States and especially in the southeast, Christian churches dot the landscape. Among these can be found exceptionally large buildings that resemble more closely arenas than church buildings. Over the past couple decades, Christian evangelical megachurches have grown exponentially in terms of membership. Every Sunday thousands of evangelicals flock to these massive congregations, and the public appeal that is made by these churches is that the Holy Spirit is able to thrive in such a large community of believers.

This prompts the question; how can a group of thousands of mostly unrelated individuals feel like an intimately connected community? This is the concern that this research will be addressing. Adding existing research to my case study of the metro-Atlanta megachurch 12Stone Church, I argue that these congregations manage to construct a well-connected community among strangers by using demographic-based
rhetorical strategies that repackage what I refer to as the Evangelical Kingdom Model which reflects the doctrinal framework behind evangelical churches that becomes actualized by megachurch leaders. This model reflects the connection between the people that engage with evangelicalism, all of whom fall into a system of responsibility and transformation that affects them and humankind on various levels. This transformation and responsibility is centered on the most influential and powerful of the levels, which in the evangelical understanding is that of the local church.

I ultimately show in this analysis that 12Stone’s use of militaristic rhetoric appeals to its target demographic of conservative white men. The way that 12Stone uses this rhetoric to sell the idea of the Kingdom is reinforced by the actualization of it in the form of large social programs and ministries which both draw in members and reinforce the community-centered framework that they are based on in the minds of members. This has the result of making members feel uniquely connected to their church because they are seeing in large, concrete forms the picture of community that the church is selling to its adherents. Thus, even though the church may have tens of thousands of members, because the individuals within the congregation see the evangelical version of community brought to life in front of them, they become reassured that they are a part of a structured, supportive community.

In this report, I start with a short summary of the history of the megachurch movement in the United States, followed by an overview of existing anthropological theories about the methods used by such churches in the growth of their congregations. After that will be a brief history of 12Stone Church and its founder Kevin Myers, which
will provide critical context for my ethnographic data, the methods of which will also be included following this history. My findings, which center on the evangelical Kingdom model will then be detailed. The conclusions from the data presented will then be expounded upon in a discussion of why this model is so effective within the 12Stone’s southern, conservative Christian context.

**Literature Review & Motivation**

One of the more recent and significant developments in the American religious scene has been the dramatic increase in Protestant megachurches that can now be found scattered across the geographical landscape. Their influence has changed the way that American people see religion in modern society, but megachurches are complex, and they did not appear overnight. In order to get a sense for the type of community that 12Stone is attempting to emulate, one must first look at the historical and anthropological context into which 12Stone and megachurches like it fall.

Today there are roughly 1750 megachurches in the U.S. (Bird and Thumma 2020, 2). Most are concentrated on the west coast and across the south, but such congregations can be found in most heavily populated areas of the country. The south alone houses 32% of the nation’s megachurches (Hudnut-Beumler 2018, 153). The term “megachurch” refers specifically to large congregations that fall within the Protestant Christian tradition. Although there are massive churches in other faiths, the Protestant megachurch is distinguishable due to the unique way it operates and its connection to popular culture. Scholars agree that in order to qualify as a megachurch a Protestant congregation must
have at least 1500-2000 weekly attendees. This boundary allows us to clearly define what
a megachurch is, especially since there are no other strict qualifications. Megachurches
often share characteristics such as a charismatic authoritative senior minister, an active
community that operates all week, a modern worship format, and a complex
organizational structure (Hartford Institute 2020). These aren’t all mandatory, and they
certainly are not exhaustive of the uncommon aspects of megachurches. The notable rise
of this brand of congregation has been termed the Megachurch Movement (hereafter
MCM).

In 18-19th century America, a significant wave of religious development began.
During this period, the increasing population and evolving culture prompted many to turn
to faith to help them feel comfortable with the changes happening around them. This
period, referred to as the Second Great Awakening, marked the founding of countless
new faith communities within the Protestant realm. At the same time that new
denominations were being brought into existence, there was also a movement to unite
Protestant churches. This ecumenical movement resulted in the consolidation of many
churches into larger organized units. Among these new united groups were the United
Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church, and the United Church of Christ (Melton
2020, 70). The consolidation of churches into large groups can be seen as being an origin
of megachurch organizational strategy. These groups often had to create expansive
meeting places in order to fit all of the members, and their leadership strategies had to
evolve to meet the needs of the continually expanding community. Member churches of
the modern MCM confront these same development steps as they continue to grow.
Despite the evidence of a genesis dating to the nineteenth century, the most oft-cited origin of the MCM is the spiritual re-awakening period that occurred starting in the 1960s. The second world war and the events leading up to it seem to have resulted in the disruption of what one would expect to be fairly consistent church attendance among Christians. A decade or so after the war was finished and won, the American public moved once again into a period of spiritual revival. The Vietnam war, a notably unpopular war for Americans, prompted a counter-cultural movement with an aim for peace, love, and harmony. This “hippie” movement consisted of mainly college-aged youths that didn’t want to be drafted into the war and instead spent their time traveling with other like-minded youths on journeys of self-exploration. These journeys tended to be spiritually motivated, which makes sense given the apparent decline in traditional modes of spirituality at the time.

These youths were especially attracted to the newly constructed idea of an “intimate, personal, supernaturally present” Christian God (Luhrmann 2012, 15). In contrast to the judgmental, destructive God the American public had been accustomed to, the picture of a trinity that was there to aid you, completely devoid of judgment and disappointment, was a readily accepted version of Christianity that appealed heavily to a generation that only wanted peace and freedom to live their lives according to their desires. On the other hand, many parents and grandparents of these youths disliked this new wave of Christianity. Their disapproval motivated a desire for a more institutionalized Christianity. The desire for a personal God among the youth combined with a reactionary call for increased institutionality birthed the modern MCM, which
managed to appeal in some form to Christians of many ages and backgrounds. The
preachers for these groups were charismatic, knew how to appeal to lots of different
people, and knew how to make the gospel accessible to those least likely to be religious.
They also had the know-how and resources to bring all of these people together into a
recognizable, regulated group that appealed to the older generations. These techniques
were employed by early MCM leaders like Aimee Semple McPherson, Robert Schuller,
Bill Hybels, and Oral Roberts and can be seen in the way current MCM pastors preach
and connect with their communities (Rakestraw C. 2020, 24).

The fact that megachurches have gotten so popular is proof enough that there is
something interesting going on within these congregations. These churches must have
well-developed strategies to be drawing in members at such high rates during a time
when traditional religion seems to be decreasing. The current literature provides some
noteworthy theories regarding potential strategies being employed.

Going back to the post World War Two period, people were noticing the drug-like
effect that worship of these newer congregations seemed to have on the participants. This
effect can be explained using anthropologist Emile Durkheim’s theory of collective
effervescence. Wellman Jr, Corcoran, and Stockly-Meyerdirk, in their work “’God is like
a drug...’: Explaining interaction ritual chains in American megachurches" (2014)
connected collective effervescence and Randall Collin’s concept of “emotional energy” in
order to pull apart why so many people feel connected to their MCM congregations.
According to them, the presence of certain “ritual ingredients" results in emotional
energy, feelings of membership and group solidarity, representative symbols, and feelings
of morality, all of which create a sense of collective effervescence where participants feel drawn in and part of the group to the point where they get a sort of “high” that addicts them to the experience. These ritual ingredients center on the attempt by megachurches to “reduce the amount of membership cultural capital required of ritual participants by minimizing traditional denominational worship and instead adopting more informal programs that draw on contemporary music and arts” (654).

This theory supplies one way to understand why people feel so drawn to the megachurch experience, however it implies that members of such congregations are being manipulated to act the way they do, which is a critique that will be explored in more depth shortly. More importantly though, this theory overlooks the other intentional means that megachurch leaders employ to create a sense of community among thousands of people, which is no small task.

Coleman and Chattoo (2020) described these means in the form of two examples. They use the terms encroachment and enclaving to illustrate two of the main ways in which megachurches bring together thousands of people into a community where members feel they are intimately connected. Encroachment is the effort of megachurch leaders to appeal to people in the broader community. This is done by using aspects of popular culture to connect with new people. An example of this is pastors selling self-help books and hosting podcasts that will reach people outside of the church. Encroachment strategies manifest similarly to advertisements in that it usually involves the church and its figurehead(s) trying to achieve a “brand” that members of the public can recognize and become familiar with. On the other hand, enclaving is the way in
which these churches mark off community lines by targeting activities or products specifically for in-group members. One common example of this is when pastors cultivate an identity that members can connect to through things like inside jokes, sayings, and traditions which any active participant would recognize. This is a strategy common among any large group of people seeking to grow closer, and in this religious setting it becomes even more effective when combined with shared faith and beliefs. Through this the church increases solidarity and participation within the community, bonding of people through shared experiences.

These are all useful theories to consider, but in my research I struggled to find considerable ethnographic literature on what it actually looks like to be part of a megachurch community, which makes it difficult to accurately assess the community building strategies that get employed and the effects they have. My own fieldwork, which will be described in more detail below, shows that these strategies can be found in modern megachurches (such as the one I researched) but that there are also more integrated and contextualized strategies at work which provide a more complete understanding of why these churches are so popular today.

Just like the society in which megachurches were born, they are constantly evolving, trying new ways to bring Christianity to the world. New developments consistently receive negative attention from the media, but MCM numbers have yet to stop growing. The state of the movement as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic has yet to be explored in any depth, and data on the topic would be useful not only towards the goal of deepening our understanding of the construction of these unique faith
communities, but also for providing information on how communities of many types can survive in times of crisis as the megachurches appear to have successfully done. 12Stone is a compelling example worth studying since it has managed to successfully navigate the pandemic, its current services being well-attended and its weekly live services receiving tens of thousands of views. Clearly, they have figured out a system for community preservation that could likely be a model for other organizations.

**A Brief History of Kevin Myers and 12Stone Church**

Despite being a public speaker, an intellectual child of coach/author John C. Maxwell, and the founder of one of America’s largest Protestant congregations, Kevin Myers’ personal life is and has been kept quite private. Most of the available details of Myers’ life are in relation to his spiritual journey and his experiences with 12Stone. Likewise, the history and mission of 12Stone Church is connected deeply with the life of Kevin Myers. So here I will attempt to briefly summarize the important developments that have led to the 12Stone that exists today.
(Myers preaching a Sunday Sermon at 12Stone’s Central campus, Feb 2020)

Kevin Myers’ Life Pre-Ministry

Kevin Myers was born in Michigan during the summer of 1961. He reports that his family was involved in “church” his whole life, and he credits his mother’s faith as being the major inspiration behind his own faith journey. At a young age, the marriage of his parents ended in a messy divorce which resulted in the departure of his father and older brother. This separation created a lasting scar on Myers’ life since, according to him, the lack of male exemplars left him confused as to how to handle his intense anger issues, which he apparently inherited from his father. These anger issues would eventually boil over within his own marriage, and Myers is surprisingly open in his sermons and books about the importance that overcoming his anger has had on his relationships with his loved ones and with God.

During his adolescent years, Myers struggled to decide between going into a career in ministry (church founding and operations) or a career in law. He competed in drama and speaking competitions during his high school years, and he knew that he had a gift for speaking. In addition to that, his mother was a single mother, and he describes his family as being financially poor, but not poor in spirit (Myers and Maxwell 2014, 15). Myers seems to have been caught between his faith and his desire for a financially secure future. As is now obvious, he chose to pursue ministry work, a decision he made at the age of sixteen through a profound experience where God revealed to him that he was to serve as a minister in His church.
Not long after committing to the ministry, Myers had two visions from God hinting at the work that he was to do. The more notable of these two is the second vision which Myers recounts in his book *Home Run* (2014),

The second vision was of a very large auditorium, a coliseum-style space filled with thousands of people. When someone came up to speak, it totally shocked me, because it wasn’t the person I expected. It was me! And for some reason, I knew that there was a number attached to that picture: eleven thousand. I have to admit that I’ve never fully understood that number. At the time, I guessed that God was telling me the church I led would be huge someday. (18)

This vision certainly did come to pass as 12Stone membership numbers have been at least eleven thousand for years now. This vision also shows that Myers was committed to 12Stone on a deeply personal and spiritual level. Although visions don’t seem to be super common spiritual practices at 12Stone (at least I didn’t hear other members speak of having visions), they serve to reinforce Myers’s claim to legitimate authority. They also provide inspiration for members by being illustrations of God’s power to provide for those that He has called.

*Early Ministry and the Founding of 12Stone*

Following an undergraduate experience studying to work in the ministry, Myers began working as a volunteer leader at Kentwood Community Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where he would eventually become a staff pastor. Kentwood Community Church is a Wesleyan megachurch, one of the few of its kind. His experience at Kentwood helped propel Myers towards launching his own church. In 1987, Kevin and his wife, Marcia, finally decided it was time to set off on “planting” their own congregation somewhere else. They settled on Gwinnett County, Georgia, which sits in the suburbs northeast of Atlanta. I was not able to find any explanation as to why this is
where they decided to go, but it ended up being an ideal location for the church that was to come.

Originally known as Crossroads Church, 12Stone Church was founded in 1987. It started with just Kevin, Marcia, and three other families from Michigan that had been recruited to move down to Georgia with the purpose of growing this church. For the first couple years, the congregation struggled to gain traction. Myers reports that they consistently went door-to-door to try and gain more members. Eventually their hard work paid off, and they found a permanent meeting place in Collins Hill, GA in 1993. The church continued to grow significantly, and in 2007 Crossroads Church became rebranded as 12Stone Church in an attempt to “reclaim [their] distinctiveness and gain ground in biblical heritage.” (12Stone 2021). The name “12Stone” is explained only in a small explanation on the 12Stone website:

After God held back the flood-stage waters of the Jordan River, the children of Israel crossed over on dry ground into the Promised Land. Once on the other side, one leader from each of the 12 tribes took a stone from the middle of the river and stacked it on the shore. This twelve-stone memorial would REMIND future generations of the rescuing hand of God. (12Stone 2021)

Thus, 12Stone seeks to create a spiritual legacy in both the old and young that will last for years to come and that will inspire future generations.
12Stone as a church is officially connected with the Wesleyan Denomination. On the 12Stone website, the church identifies itself as “a local expression” of the Wesleyan Church. While the Wesleyan Church broadly is considered a part of the Methodist sect, 12Stone as an individual church makes no explicit connection to the Methodist organization, and it (meaning the leaders and official church materials) only rarely make mention of their connection to Wesleyanism. Leaders and members of 12Stone understand themselves most importantly as part of Evangelical Christianity, and there is an explicit partnership between 12Stone and other large evangelical churches through resource sharing. For instance, in multiple sermons I watched and/or attended, 12Stone leaders mentioned how they were able to make large donations of money to other growing Protestant churches across the south. In summary, although the church is officially a Wesleyan church, this denominational connection seems to play only a small role in the identity of the church and its members, and the leadership even makes efforts to give no particular favor to certain denominations or local churches over others, even its
own. There is an interesting attitude of fluidity between 12Stone and other local churches that is important to understanding how 12Stone understands its role in the community, but that will be discussed at length later on in this report.

In 2010, Outreach Magazine ranked 12Stone Church as the #1 fastest growing church in America, which drew even more people to the church (Whitten 2010). The land for the seventh (Bethlehem) campus was purchased in 2018. This last campus is still under construction due to postponed plans as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Today, all of these campuses (with the exception of the unfinished Bethlehem campus) are receiving significant numbers of attendees and the church is still functioning quite well. The Hartford Institute cites 12Stone’s membership as being over 13,000 members (Hartford Institute 2020). There is much more to this story, but hopefully this gives you a feel for the origins and history of this church, which is helpful in understanding the mindset of its members and leaders.

Methodology

I marked the formal start of my fieldwork when I arrived in Atlanta, Georgia and started attending in-person 12Stone services in April 2021. At that point, I had been following 12Stone activities online for about three months, so I was already vaguely familiar with how the Sunday services would go. I ultimately spent about six months in the field, which in the discipline of anthropology is not any significant amount of time, but despite this, I do believe that I managed to come to some interesting conclusions that will be developed later on in this report.
For the first couple weeks in the field I spent the weekdays combing in more
detail 12Stone’s social media pages and websites. On Sundays I would attend a service at
one of the 12Stone campuses, since at that point I wasn’t sure what location I would
decide to regularly attend. In this search, I happened to find out about a 12Stone Home
location that I would quickly make my regular Sunday meeting place. To protect the
privacy of the people that attend this 12Stone Home location, I will refer to it only as the
Place.

From that point on, I attended Sunday services (when possible) at the Place where
I conducted many informal interviews with the members and leaders there. I found that
the regular attendees at the Place were very excited about my presence, especially in the
beginning, and thus they went out of their way to approach me and answer any questions
I threw their way. The longer I was there though, I did sense that their excitement waned,
which likely came from the fact that I maintained a more half-hearted interest in officially
joining their church (more on what that would mean to come).

During the weekdays I would continue to monitor and dig into the 12Stone
websites and social media pages. In addition to this, I spent time reading as many of the
books authored by Kevin Myers as I could find. These books ended up being very
insightful since they filled in many details about 12Stone and its history that are assumed
to be known and/or are simply not mentioned often in services.

It became clear from early on that if I really wanted to understand how to actually
enter this community, I would need to go through the closest thing I could find to an
initiation. This process appears to have gone through branding changes over time, but at
the time of my fieldwork the church was calling it Growth Track. Growth Track was a three week (or three session) “course” that anyone could sign up for. In the course, faculty members of the church would introduce you to the history and mission of the church (week one), help you find out what type of place you could hold in the church (week two), and have you agree to the 12Stone Family Code and get you connected to a specific ministry through which you could serve (week three). One doesn’t have to go through this process in order to attend services regularly, but, as I will elaborate on later, if you don’t get connected to the ministries in some way then you can’t authoritatively claim membership.

I participated in the three Growth Track sessions, but I decided not to sign the Family Code at the end of the third session, so I technically did not complete the process. However, considering the time limitations on my fieldwork, doing so wouldn’t have granted me any more data than I already had access to at the time. Fully completing Growth Track also would have settled me into a membership in this church that might have caused trouble in the future since I did not plan to be a full or lasting member of this community.

In sum, the vast majority of the data in this report comes from my first-hand observations of 12Stone sermons and activities, informal interviews with various members of the community, details from Myers’s published books, 12Stone social media sites, and the information given through the Growth Track course. It is important to note here that I was told (by a member high up in the 12Stone organization) very early on in my fieldwork that I was not to reach out to any of 12Stone’s leadership team for meetings
or interviews. This ended up working in my favor because my interviews with lay members proved significantly more useful and wide-reaching. Myers’s books also capture most of what he and others in the leadership would likely have said to me if I had had the opportunity to interview them.

The impacts of the Covid-19 Pandemic on this research

I find it imperative to acknowledge how the state of the Coronavirus (or Covid-19) pandemic affected the work I was conducting. In April/May of 2021, the state of Georgia had minimal demands on businesses to implement Covid-preventative guidelines, but CDC guidelines were still being used by most entities to guide them through the post-pandemic transitionary period that had recently begun with the first waves of distribution of the Covid vaccines. As the summer progressed, fewer and fewer public places mandated behaviors like mask-wearing and social distancing. By the end of my fieldwork, vaccines were widely and easily available to the public, and most people that were not vaccinated had made the conscious decision to not do so.

12Stone at the beginning of my fieldwork was holding in-person Sunday services, as they had been for a couple months. The campuses usually had masks available at the front of their buildings, but mask-wearing was not mandated and the vast majority of attendees did not wear them at the services. Social distancing was also not mandated, but the number of people attending in-person were still pretty limited so it did appear that many of those in the audience were distant from each other, whether or not this was intentional was not obvious.
The church broadcasted a sermon about 12Stone’s official stance on the pandemic and its consequences on May 24th. This sermon became the policy by which all church-related activities were to be conducted until the pandemic was over. The sermon was titled, “A Covid Conversation,” and in it 12Stone senior pastors Kevin Myers and Jason Berry use the metaphor of a traffic light to describe how 12Stone and its members should be approaching the pandemic. The three lights of a traffic light are used to represent the three general categories of attitudes about the pandemic: red is those that are approaching it with complete caution, green for those who throw caution to the wind, and yellow for those in the middle. Despite these differences, Myers clarifies, “We are the whole traffic light. We are one church, three different opinions. If you have to have the whole church be your light color, you're gonna be in trouble, here and everywhere. Because listen, there's no right or wrong. Here's what I mean when it comes to COVID opinions.”

In practice, this meant that 12Stone would hold in-person activities within the general direction of government mandates, but outside of official regulations, 12Stone would not patrol or monitor Covid-related behaviors like wearing masks and social distancing. Those who wanted to wear masks were more than welcome to, and those who did not want to wear masks would not be forced to. This is what I observed when I attended in-person Sunday services and 12Stone Home gatherings, especially in the beginning of my fieldwork.

Despite 12Stone’s commitment to holding in-person Sunday services throughout the pandemic, the church was not officially or regularly hosting large-group gatherings
for most of my fieldwork. The first large and public gathering happened at the end of June, and for a while it was the only one of its kind to occur. Small group and 12Stone Home gatherings were consistently hosted by private parties, but these were less accessible, especially to newcomers to the church who likely did not know much about what these activities were or how to attend.

Personally, I made it a priority to get the Covid-19 vaccine as soon as I got into the field (which I was able to do). During the two or three weeks in which I had not received both doses, I decided to wear a mask to the 12Stone events I attended. This did serve initially as a feature that made me stand out to the congregants because, as I stated above, I was one of only a handful of people present that wore a mask. Once I was fully vaccinated, I did not wear a mask to events and this did have a clear effect on the amount of people that willingly approached me.

**Results/Findings**

Throughout my fieldwork, I observed that the leaders and members of 12Stone Church would constantly refer to what they called “the church,” “(a/the) kingdom,” and/or just “church” (singular). It would confuse me every time they would use these terms because the speakers never provided any explicit clarification as to what these terms were referring to. To add to the confusion, they also used them somewhat interchangeably. The more this came up in sermons, conversations, and literature, the more curious I became as to what these terms meant. What is “the kingdom,” “the
church,” or just “church”? The basic dictionary definitions of these terms denote a community of some sort, but what do they mean in this evangelical megachurch context?

I flagged or noted the instances when these terms would come up, and with these speech events I attempted to create a picture that would explain how the terms fit together. In doing this I imagined that I would be led to what 12Stone imagines their community to be, and how they fit into a broader picture of Evangelical Christianity. By the end of my fieldwork, I had created a model (Figure 1) that represents the various aspects of what I had discovered was a multi-leveled understanding of community that 12Stone was using to connect its members to each other, including their families, their local community of believers, other Christians, and God himself. Differentiating itself from the other Protestant churches, evangelicalism puts its emphasis on the Local Church level, which acts as the source of community, power, and authority.

All of these levels function together as a metaphor of community that conveys the mission of Evangelical Christianity, which is to preach the “good word” (the gospel of Christ) to the world. This effort requires personal transformation and connection on multiple levels, and these levels are what I am concentrating my efforts on defining here. I refer to this structure as “The (Evangelical) Kingdom Model” because it is a figure that represents a doctrinal and linguistic framework used to illustrate the proper purpose and function of the 12Stone (local church) community and the broader community that it fits into.

The model consists of five levels that span out from the individual soul and are all united in the evangelical mission. The five levels, from the smallest unit to the broadest,
are the individual, the family, the local church, the Church, and the Kingdom. These categories all contain those levels that are smaller than them. For example, the local church includes the levels of the family and the individual. Individually they emphasize the varying responsibilities and purposes that are involved with the maintenance of each level. Together, these five levels function constantly and simultaneously for the preservation and development of the overall Kingdom.

As can be seen in the model, the Local Church level is highlighted because it represents the most important and unique aspect of the evangelical experience. There are arrows directing away from this level on both sides to represent how the local church serves as the axis of power and connection for the levels it encompasses and the levels in which it sits. Why this is the case will be explained later on.

This model represents the structure that evangelical churches use to make sense of their role in the spectrum of God's design for humanity. It is a model for providing an understanding of community to church leaders, organizers, and members. This model does not explain all the behavior and strategies these churches exhibit, but it reflects the structure that evangelical churches reference in their mission to provide a comprehensive organization. Without this reference guide, these churches (and especially megachurches like 12Stone) would have a much more difficult time crafting and implementing strategies to use in order to bring in new members. As my data shows, this model is the common reference point that 12Stone (and other similar churches) crafts its rhetoric around in order to appeal to its primary demographics. Because these levels become more
abstract as one moves out from the center, it would be most beneficial to start my explanation with the smallest unit, which is the individual.

The Evangelical Kingdom Model

(Figure 1)

The Individual

“The individual” can theoretically represent any singular person, but within this context it typically refers to any singular person that identifies as any type of evangelical Christian or that is a potential convert. An individual can formally become part of the Kingdom through baptism, a verbal commitment to Christ and his gospel, or some other specific act. A formal initiatory act is not always necessary for acceptance into these communities, but one will usually volunteer to participate in one at some point in their spiritual journey, usually as a result of their sub-group putting spiritual emphasis on one

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1 This variation comes from administrative differences between denominations/congregations.
of these types of activity. At 12Stone, one can participate in many church activities without any sort of formal initiatory event, however, the sermons and teachings of this church emphasize individual responsibility for one’s salvation and for the welfare of the church, which creates pressure to perform an act of faith (often publicly) and to sacrifice in order to help build the church.

The main way in which individuals at 12Stone “go public with [their] faith,” to put it in the church’s words, is through baptism. During my fieldwork there were multiple open-baptism events. These events were quite popular, and at one particular “party” over 200 people were baptized in one day across the 12Stone campuses. The previous week’s sermon focused on the importance of baptism and stated that one can decide to get baptized at any point in their life, and that one doesn’t even need more than a couple minutes preparation to make this decision. It seems that the act of being baptized, while not explicitly necessary for membership, proves one's commitment to Christ and is especially positive when done in front of other people to whom one may inspire to also be baptized. It is important to note that baptism in this case does not initiate one into 12Stone singularly, but into broader Christianity. A person who has been baptized in another Christian congregation does not necessarily need to be baptized again at 12Stone, but the church does encourage people to do so, according to their desire.
The purpose of the individual in the context of the Kingdom metaphor is to cultivate in oneself a commitment to Christ and his will. This will is mainly that one will be obedient to the commandments put forth in the Bible. The will also includes the impetus to use one's faith to encourage faith in others, which we see here in the form of baptism. The overall emphasis is in personal spiritual and emotional transformation, which 12Stone has as one of its primary goals. Once one has begun to be transformed, they can use this experience to prompt the process in others, which serves the evangelical mission by strengthening and expanding the Kingdom. The administration of initiatory and developmental programs like baptism illustrates how although the individual is the most fundamental unit of the model, it is only from the local church that individuals are endowed with connection to the Kingdom.

No church can survive without committed individuals who prioritize their faith. Much of how 12Stone and other evangelical megachurches function is through the financial and social support of their members. Without the transformation of individuals,
the church would not be able to bring to life its community. There would be no ministries, no parties, no self-help programs, nor anything else that these churches prize as their top selling-points. Basically, if there are no individuals, then there is no community, and without community there cannot be a Kingdom.

The Family

In this metaphor, the family embodies the ideal, traditional nuclear family. It can be expanded to include less traditional or found family structures, but these are much less emphasized in the rhetoric of this model. This category of the family is the least developed of the levels described here, but this is mainly due to the unpredictability and instability of family units on a general level. It is difficult to classify in concrete terms what the family should be and how it should operate when families naturally come in many forms and wind up in endless different circumstances.²

In the context of 12Stone’s ontology (which is the evangelical ontology), the family exists to help perpetuate the mission of Christianity, which in their eyes is to acquaint all of humanity with the salvation that comes through Christ. In application of this concept, parents are to teach their children the values that they should develop in order to mold them into productive and ideal members of the community. The ideal is that the children will become pillars of their respective congregations and serve as an example and inspiration to those around them. This should have the effect of drawing people into Christianity.

² 12Stone openly supports any heteronormative family structure, and they make efforts to lend extra support to single-parent families. The church encourages members to love and care for all people in the community, regardless of their sexuality, but same-sex marriages and relationships do not receive recognition and are assumably not acceptable, which aligns with standard (traditional) biblical interpretations of this issue.
One can see the effectiveness of this strategy through the example of Kevin Myers.\textsuperscript{3} This concept of the parents being responsible for the proper evangelical socialization of their children is illustrated in the relationship that Myers has with his children. He accounts in his books and sermons how he strives to impress upon his four kids how they can develop a “grown-up faith,” an ideological foundation that cements them in the Christian community and mission and which they can expand as they learn throughout their lives. Myers prefers to use metaphors to teach his children, and these metaphors usually become sermons for his congregation.

Inevitably, children will commit failures as Christians during their lives, and 12Stone encourages children to turn to their parents for strength when this happens. On the other hand, parents are supposed to be strong enough to serve as sources of faith and strength for their children, especially when their children fail to meet their parent’s high expectations. Ultimately, the family at 12Stone serves to cultivate individual faith and commitment through the emotional/spiritual benefits of existing as a (traditional) family unit, fulfilling the evangelical mission.

The family is a critical level of this model because it is how individuals are prepared for their spiritual missions in life. Without a familial context, committing to a church such as 12Stone (or any church) can be a difficult journey. Thus, the family must be prized as an important social unit because without it there can be no local church and thereby no Christianity. However, without the local church then there can be no point

\textsuperscript{3} Many members cite Kevin Myers (as an individual) as being one of the main reasons that they investigated and/or stayed at 12Stone.
through which to unite individuals into “proper” families and thus we see again the pervasive and powerful role of the local church.

*The Local Church*

The local church, in the context of this model, refers to any individual congregation that evangelical members can attend and which supports the evangelical mission. Depending on who you ask, this may be limited to congregations within a specific denomination or it could have a wider range of any Protestant congregation. Evangelical Christianity in general crosses many denominational boundaries, but some congregations and denominations are more restrictive about what they will consider as part of the Kingdom from their perspective. Regardless, within the evangelical model we are dealing with here, the local church’s primary purpose is to connect individuals and families with others in the local, geographic community and to be the authoritative ultimate source of spiritual direction and transformation.

12Stone Church as an entity would fit into this level of the Kingdom diagram, but it is a unique example of the local church because it is technically one congregation split into defined subgroups (its seven campuses). Each of these campuses has its own congregation, which can be and usually are quite large. The campuses could be considered individual churches if not for their dependence on the 12Stone organization, including resources like Myers and Berry’s sermons that are broadcasted every week and which are the centerpiece of the service at every campus.

Each campus has its own building that contains a theatre of some sort for the congregation to sit in to participate in services. These theatres have stages that the local
pastors use to make announcements at the beginning and end of each Sunday service. The stages are also used for the bands of each respective campus to conduct the “worship” part of the weekly services, a much-loved part of the Sunday experience for members. Every campus also has a small coffee shop of sorts that, before the pandemic, provided coffee for members to bring with them into the theatre for the service. The campuses each also have their own staffs, led by a Campus Pastor that is delegated by Myers and Berry in the administration of church initiatives and programs.

As a response to pandemic regulations, 12Stone launched its 12Stone Home initiative, which was (and still is) a revolutionary strategy that permitted individual families or households to host “church” on Sundays in their homes, thus allowing 12Stone to have its members gather in-person without explicitly disobeying CDC guidelines, which did not allow the members to gather on the church’s official campuses at the beginning of the pandemic. As the campuses began to hold in-person services again, the 12Stone allowed the 12Stone Homes to continue to exist, and they still exist today with considerable support from the regulars at these gatherings. These 12Stone Homes function as unofficial campuses since 12Stone continues to fund their existence and the leadership of the 12Stone Home pastors (which are authorized and trained by 12Stone officials). The future of this initiative is unclear, but during my fieldwork the Homes were just as important as (if not more than) the campuses in terms of the local church community.

Despite the fact that 12Stone is split into its own local congregations and groups, it is still considered a “local church” since members of any given location will primarily
identify themselves (to outsiders) as members of 12Stone Church, almost always without clarification on which campus they regularly attend. This reflects the view that members have that they are all members of this one church, even if they attend services in different places. Within the community, members refer to themselves as “12Stoners,” which is based on a joke made by Kevin Myers a couple years back.

Of more importance is the title that Kevin Myers gave to the church that members have adopted, which is the identification of the community as the “12Stone Family.” Leaders on all levels of the organization refer to the collective 12Stone membership as a family unit. At one particular event that I attended, the local pastor asked the congregation, “I call us a family, because we’re a family, right?” To which the audience enthusiastically replied with cheers of agreement. During my fieldwork, the church even conducted a sermon series on how the 12Stone church is a family of believers. This view of 12Stone as a family is meant to connect members into a group that is more than just a collection of individuals, and thus the members have a duty to love and serve each other as well as the church itself as members of a family would serve each other and the unit as a whole.

12Stone has dedicated countless amounts of resources toward uniting the members into one community, including free parties, gatherings, holiday celebrations, and more. In 2020, 12Stone launched its “Can’t Stop Community” movement, which emphasized service and connection between members through social media, sermons, merchandising, and events. Many members on social media have made posts with the hashtag #cantstopcommunity where they show what they are up to and how they are
interacting with the church. This campaign was especially effective during the more intense stages of the pandemic in which members were mainly associating with one another through the internet since meeting in person was limited. In the Sunday services, Myers and other church leaders promoted the movement by not only plugging the phrase with its hashtag, but also by centering the focus of their sermons on the importance of community connectedness through the lens of the church as a family, as described above.

Although the “Can’t Stop Community” title is unique to 12Stone, evangelical churches everywhere place extraordinary emphasis on the importance of being intimately connected to those around you, particularly those of your own faith. This relies on the well-supported assumption that being connected to like-minded people strengthens your shared perspectives and has the effect of pressuring others to join you. This reflects the purpose of the local church, which is to strengthen and build connections between the members of the Kingdom that are close (geographically) to you.

Here we see how the idea of a family unit from the previous level is broadened in order to reflect the commitment that 12Stone has to its members and likewise the commitment it requires of its members. In a way, 12Stone is conveying how, although it is an institution, it is one with the purpose of nurturing individuals and preparing them for their own nuclear families. This rhetoric also further conveys the effective fluidity of the different levels of the model in conveying messages to the church. 12Stone can be an individual, a family, and a church, and it certainly must consist of all three in order to survive.

*The Church*
At 12Stone and many other evangelical congregations, it is common to hear the speaker refer to being or having been involved with “church.” For instance, at one 12Stone sermon I attended, the speaker (who was one of 12Stone’s Campus Pastors) described how his family had been involved with church since he was a baby. I sat there and wondered what he meant by “church.” This term received no context or elaboration, implying that the speaker had assumed the audience knew what he meant. I, as a visitor, did not know what this meant, but I got the sense that I was likely in the minority of congregants that was not sure what “church” was referring to since many in the audience nodded in acknowledgement at his statement.

Speech events like this were quite common, and it became clear pretty quickly what it meant when members or leaders used the term “church” in this way. It was as if they were saying it with a capital “C.” They were referring to a broader group than just 12Stone, and from an analysis of the many times that this topic came up, I learned that “Church” usually means any congregation or denomination that aligns itself with 12Stone’s mission, which is itself the evangelical mission. Therefore, “church” or the Church consists of the vast number of evangelical local churches that exist as a network of believers and workers for the evangelical mission, which as stated above, is to further grow this network.

This network has been able to persevere and develop due to a series of effective symbols that members use and identify with. I’ve seen these symbols in all of the evangelical sermons or occasions I’ve attended or watched. Their effectiveness comes from their ability to unify believers with a common cause that they perceive to exist on a
moral high ground. At 12Stone, the most common symbol that was used by leaders and members was that of a common, higher calling. The best way for me to convey this concept is to include here some quotations from 12Stone leaders;\(^4\)

Listen, we're unlike anyone else on Earth. We've been restored to God. We follow Jesus. We have a common calling. (12Stone 2020)

In Christ, we abandon to a common calling and common courtesy. This is what it means to be in Christ. We go above. Where did I get these thoughts? I didn't just make this up. When Paul wrote in Romans chapter twelve, verse ten: “By the power of the Holy Spirit inspiration honor one another above yourselves.” (12Stone 2020)

Under the new covenant, in what the New Testament writers call the body of Christ or God's church, we're all equal...There are high school dropouts and PhDs, restaurant servers and CEOs. Some people live below the poverty line and others earn millions of dollars a year. There are broken families, blended families, single-parent families, and traditional families, with couples who have been married for more than sixty years. Our congregation includes blacks, whites, Hispanics, and Asians. There are ex-atheists, former Buddhists and Muslims, and people of just about every other faith background. But we're one church family! (Myers 2019)

Like the phone rings, God calls you up to be forgiven of your sin and restored to him through Jesus, and now you have a calling on your life. You've been called up to something bigger. You've been called up to the Kingdom of God, and for that calling, one must live worthy of the name of Jesus. (12Stone 2020)

The idea to draw from these statements is that when one joins the evangelical mission through a commitment to Christ and his gospel, one prioritizes this new identity above all else. Your social status, race, family circumstances, education, etc. no longer define you. Christ defines you. Not stated in the quotes above but often explained at 12Stone was the idea that once someone commits to Christ, they are automatically saved. This redemption experienced by all members connects them under a common calling. On this topic, Myers

\(^4\) Quotations have been edited for clarity.
stated that, "God wants us to connect with anyone who is near to us but far from
him... We have experienced his redemption, so we offer his redemption to others. And we
train those who accept Jesus to join us in our mission." (2019, 202). The common calling
is the evangelical responsibility to convert others to the Gospel of Christ and unite them
with you in this calling. This is the ultimate purpose of The Church, to expose as many
people as possible to Christ’s redemption.

Within the broader range of the Kingdom model, the Church is the source through
which the local churches and their families draw legitimacy. Although the local church
wields the most influence over the organization as a whole, the Church, which is
evangelical Christianity, helps set cultural expectations and gives those expectations
political power by means of its historical presence and legitimacy.

The Kingdom

At first glance, it might seem that the Church and the Kingdom are the same
thing. In fact, many people in the Church seem to use the two terms interchangeably.
However, there is a difference between the Church and the Kingdom, and that is because
the Church is just a part of what makes up the Kingdom as a whole. What is the other
part? The answer is God. The Kingdom consists of the Church combined with the power
and support of an enthroned God as King. Just as the Church is the source of legitimacy
for the local church, God and his mission provide spiritual legitimacy for everything that
the Church does (or at least that is the idea).

The Church was created by God to help fulfill his mission for man, and thus while
he may help it along, the Church itself does not include God. He is separate by necessity
because fallen mortals cannot be grouped in with God unless his superiority is evident. This is fulfilled by the name “kingdom,” which implies the presence of a King who reigns. This lines up with Christian evangelical (as well as broader Christian) depictions of God as omnipotent and omnipresent in the world. By calling themselves a “Kingdom of God,” this group of people acknowledges their inferiority and dependence on God as creator and ruler. God controls the future of the Church and his orders dictate the behavior of its adherents. This is illustrated in the following statement made by Myers in the 2020 sermon, “A Covid Conversation,” “God is calling us to something higher. The unity of God is greater than any other type of unity. The unity of the spirit is fragile and we must protect it. The world is the Kingdom of Darkness run by Satan. His Church makes God's unity possible. Jesus made the unity and we must protect it.”

I cannot speak for every Protestant denomination, but at least in the Wesleyan view taught at 12Stone, the members of the Kingdom understand their role in all of this to be to grow the Kingdom network as large as possible in anticipation of the day in which Christ will return to earth to reign as King over all, destroying the wicked and rewarding the redeemed for their hard work and faith. In one of his books, Myers stated, "Finally, everything will come full circle, and God and redeemed people will be together in paradise," (2019, 43). From this we see that the Kingdom that exists now will only continue to grow and grow until God decides it is time to unite himself with the Church on earth in a triumphant destruction over evil.

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5 In this context as well as that of most Christian denominations, Jesus and God are seen as different manifestations of the same entity, hence the equal emphasis on both Jesus and God in this statement.
Discussion

The five levels described above make up the model that represents what 12Stone is selling to its members. It is based on a picture of a world that makes the commitment to the principles of the Church not only worthwhile but highly desirable. More importantly though, it is a picture that can be stylized to target any demographic.

As an individual church grows to notably high membership numbers, the leaders of that congregation have to shift the way they market and lead the church in order to sustain their numbers and continue to grow. A local church must become more intentional in how they market evangelicalism to prospective members who have not been taken in with their efforts thus far. The underlying question we’ve now reached is; why does this model work with this particular group of people in suburban Atlanta? It clearly does work since many of this congregation and many others like it have reached megachurch proportions across the United States, which is surprising in a time when organized religion is generally declining.

In order to properly answer this question, one must note the influence of the increasingly polarized American political sphere. For years, American politics has become more and more polarized, coming to a head with the 2016 and 2020 election cycles. The influence of the antagonistic rhetoric from both sides of the political arena has prompted many Americans toward adopting progressively extreme positions on popular issues. On the political right, figures including Donald Trump, Rush Limbaugh, Mike Pence, Ben Shapiro and many others have contributed to the aggressively pro-right stances and rhetoric being accepted by conservatives across the country. Basically, what
the country has seen over the past decade is the increasing influence of far-right, notably militaristic ideas on all parts of the political right as a result of the general polarization occurring across the spectrum.

Although congregations like and including 12Stone claim to have members on all parts of the political spectrum, the evangelical teachings are candidly and consistently aligned with more conservative viewpoints, especially in the realm of social issues like abortion, gay marriage, gender roles, etc. Kevin Myers, in reference to this claim, stated in a recent sermon that the church’s stances on such hot-topic issues are influenced exclusively on what the Bible teaches. What he really meant here was that 12Stone follows what is taught in the Bible from a traditional interpretation of the book. The teachings of the Bible can be interpreted in countless ways, but my research found that 12Stone’s teachings consistently followed traditional, conservative interpretations as opposed to more “liberal” interpretations.

12Stone overall claims no political associations; they have no political figures or commentators speak at the campuses nor do they explicitly encourage members to vote in certain directions. However, the conversations I had with members and the nuances of many of the sermons I watched suggested a strong conservative mindset among most of the church. It doesn’t seem to be far-right in nature, but it is most definitely conservative. Additionally, although I have no exact numbers, I witnessed that the majority of 12Stoners are middle-aged to retired white men. The combination of conservative viewpoints with an overwhelmingly white membership signals that white grievance politics may be playing a role in the appeal of the church.
Taking this into consideration, there seems to be a clear connection between the conservative self-defensive and militaristic mindset that has been birthed by anxieties about the growing far-left and the Kingdom mentality I’ve described above. As the world becomes more secular, religious conservatives have become concerned that an alleged socialist entity will come about and persecute conservative Christians to the point where they will have to escape modern society. Interpretations I have heard of this scenario usually suggest (implicitly or explicitly) that this persecution will further unite Christians together into an isolated Kingdom of believers, and that not long after this event takes place, Christ will return to reign over the earth, destroying all enemies of the Kingdom. This description is clearly reflected in one specific conversation I had with a member of the Place about the growth of home churches like the one we were at. My summary of the conversation in my field notes looked like this,

I remarked how this place has become like its own church. She described how she thinks that things like this [home churches] will become the norm. This is because "Christianity is being pushed underground." She supports this by referencing a school that got in trouble for saying "that marriage is between man and woman and that girls are girls and boys are boys at birth."

So the end-goal of the Kingdom (which is the return of Christ) is being predicted by conservatives such as this woman as being the result of the persecution of conservative Christians by those on the political left. Therefore, instead of fearing the polarization of politics, conservative evangelicals are attempting to use this time as an opportunity to further connect with their religious community, which will theoretically soon become their only community as the evil are wiped out in the near future. In sum, the current political polarization, particularly that on the political right, has facilitated the spread of
the Kingdom network as conservatives group together under these symbols and in
solidarity to protect themselves from a perceived impending oblivion.

12Stone has made productive use of this perspective by infusing it with explicit
military terminology popular in politically right discourse; rhetoric which diverges
strongly from traditional Methodist rhetoric. This strategy is not subtle. One obvious way
this can be seen is through various sermon titles given in the past couple years, including
“This is War” (1.17.21), “Choose Your Weapon” (1.24.21), “How Do I Fight
Temptation?” (5.17.20) and “The Fight for Unity” (9.13.20), to name a few. In
September of 2019, Kevin Myers gave a sermon titled, “We Are More Than
Conquerors,” in which he described explicitly the goal of the Kingdom. His words
perfectly encompass all that I’ve been describing here. In this sermon Myers made the
following points,

It's less about taking hits and more about taking territory. We are created to be
conquerors for the Kingdom of God. Players aren’t on the field to take hits, they
are there to score. We've already won since we get to go to Heaven because of
Christ. Every time a soul or family or community gets transformed, God (and us
by extension) scores. The gospel is not about us, it's about God's mission.
(12Stone, 2019)

We see in this excerpt the genius combination of militaristic strategies and sporting
language (which takes advantage of the other favored conservative-American subject
matter, which in itself is a military metaphor) in the preaching of the most critical
evangelical goal, fulfilling God’s mission. The idea that those within the Kingdom see
themselves as conquerors for God illustrates this deep commitment to the evangelical
mission of spreading the gospel. However, as the title of the sermon suggests, this is not
their only commitment. They are conquerors but they are also people who seek out
transformation and connection. This is where the levels of the Kingdom model come into play because one cannot build a lasting kingdom on numbers alone; you have to collect people that are willing to also be completely overcome and transformed by this mission. This is why the Church continues to grow and grow despite the decrease in mainstream acceptability.

In summary, the evangelical Kingdom model creates the perfect metaphor for mounting a socio-political movement with this conservative, mainly white demographic in mind. 12Stone uses this model by packaging it in rhetoric that is both familiar and appealing to its main demographic. 12Stone creates a spiritual gift that is difficult to turn away for those who feel politically isolated and that seek community. In this they are also building a spreading web of transformation and commitment to the broader community of evangelicalism from which it draws support.

**Conclusion**

The construction and development of the Kingdom through churches like 12Stone is important to understand within the field of anthropology because it reflects the increasing movement among religious conservatives towards an intentional departure from mainstream American culture. The efforts of the evangelical megachurch movement may begin to shift away from attempting to grow their membership as they sense the prophesied return of Christ, an event many feel is being signaled by the increasing polarity of American politics which has brought conservatism in general under fierce attack. If the Church were to decide to reduce proselytizing efforts, this would hint to the
population a potential rise in animosity from the Church as members prepare more practically for what they believe will come with Christ’s return to earth, including the destruction of all His enemies.

At the current moment, the evangelical megachurch movement represents the evolution of Christianity in conservative America (as well as around the world). Although versions of this have existed throughout Christianity’s history, the megachurch movement now is uniquely defined through its connection and commitment to popular culture and technological developments. It represents America’s changing ideas about what Christianity should consist of and how it should affect the world. There are many evangelicals who are less convinced that the second coming of Christ is near, and in these perspectives we can see how Christians of all ages see finding a community of believers to be a top priority. Even if members are only somewhat committed to the overall mission of evangelicalism, they get to benefit from the company and experience of a large, mostly united Christian community through megachurches like 12Stone, which also makes profound efforts to make attending church a pleasant and spiritually powerful experience.

On a personal level, this research has made it clearer to me how these massive churches manage to pull together so many people of different ages, races, economic statuses, and religious experiences into one interconnected community. This evangelical Kingdom model demonstrates how members of one church can associate themselves with another evangelical congregation thousands of miles away. The doctrinal framework being referenced here allows individuals to share a common identity and purpose with other members, other families, other local churches, the global Church, and ultimately
with God himself. This connection is evident through the constant but seemingly mundane speech events where members and leaders at 12Stone implied that 12Stone is not the whole of God’s mission, but a segment that contributes to the overall effort of spreading the gospel.
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