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**Towards a Political-Cultural Explanation of the “Christian Right”:
Bellevue Baptist Church and the Republicanisation of American
Evangelicalism**

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Introduction: Towards a Political-Cultural Explanation of the “Christian Right”

Between the 1960s and the 1980s the decline of mainline Protestant churches and the simultaneous growth of conservative denominations enabled evangelicalism to become the largest religious group in the whole of the United States.¹ The dominance of evangelicals in the post-war American religious landscape naturally made the movement a particularly potent political resource. Evangelicals’ shift from being a bipartisan group to a predominantly Republican movement with strong right-wing affiliations is therefore justifiably considered to be one of the most significant political reorientations in twentieth century American history. Ever since this realignment was forged in the late-1970s, the so-called “Christian Right” has received a large amount of attention from historians and political scientists. But most of the scholarly attention devoted to the growth of contemporary white evangelicalism and the emergence of its politicised offspring the Christian Right has focussed on the movement from broad, generalised perspectives. This thesis arises from the need for a study which examines the post-war history of white evangelicalism at a local, congregational level. By viewing the movement through the lens of congregational culture, this methodology is receptive to how the post-war history of white evangelicalism was influenced by the urban, political and socioeconomic forces that existed in American localities at the end of the twentieth century. The most important effect of this novel approach towards contemporary evangelicalism is, as this thesis demonstrates, a reinterpretation of the nature and origins of the movement’s post-1970s political shifts.

The case study chosen to carry out this congregational analysis is Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis, Tennessee, one of the largest and most well-known evangelical congregations in the United States. As Richard Kyle somewhat understatedly remarks, evangelicalism is a ‘broad movement’ that in the American context encompasses a large number of different denominations and includes ‘many diverse elements, some [of which are] in conflict with each other’.² Bellevue could therefore never be said to represent evangelicalism as a whole. However, Bellevue’s historical, theological and geographical characteristics make the church a particularly appropriate site for examining ‘the conservative political alignment’ of evangelicalism that took place within the movement from the 1980s onwards.³ Bellevue’s strict theological conservatism and opposition to cultural accommodation means the church is positioned firmly on the “fundamentalist” side of the evangelical ideological continuum, an orientation which many—if not the majority—of the Christian Right’s constituents have shared in common.⁴ Moreover, Bellevue’s physical

¹ Axel R. Schafer, “Religion, the Cold War State, and the Resurgence of Evangelism in the US, 1942 – 1990”, *ZENAF Arbeits und Forschungsberichte (ZAF)* (2006), p. 5.

² Richard G. Kyle, *Evangelicalism: An Americanized Christianity*, (New Brunswick, NJ and London: Transaction Publishers, 2006), p. 11, 13.

³ Schafer, “Religion, the Cold War State”, p. 10.

⁴ Over four decades ago expert of evangelicalism Richard Quebedeaux conceived of five different categories of evangelicals which are still relevant today. The two most extreme categories in Quebedeaux’s system are the “Separatist Fundamentalists” and the “Open Fundamentalists”. The

presence in a large southern city has meant that the church's history has inevitably been entwined with post-war urban history, and in particular the forces that transformed the socioeconomic, political, demographic and racial terrain of the American South. This most obviously includes the phenomenon known as "white flight", which was one of the key narratives of the post-civil rights era South and which Bellevue itself participated in in 1989 by withdrawing from its original inner-city location to a suburban neighbourhood. Lastly, Bellevue is a suitable case study because the church had actual, tangible connections with the conservative political tendencies that rose from within the evangelical movement. Dr Adrian Rogers—who was Bellevue's pastor between 1972 and 2005 and who oversaw a prolonged period of exceptional growth for the church—was one of the main "architects" of the Southern Baptist Convention's "Conservative Resurgence", an attempt by conservatives to drive out all traces of liberalism from the denomination and which had close links with the Christian Right itself.⁵ The case study of Bellevue Baptist Church therefore provides an opportunity to investigate how the congregational culture of an important church related to the post-war history of evangelicalism and the regional locales of Memphis and the US South.

The most important contribution of this thesis is its reinterpretation of conservative evangelicalism's political and electoral alliance with the Republican Party. By shifting the historiography's attention away from the movement's elite-level mobilisation, it offers an alternative reading of the causes of the movement's post-war political realignments. The issue of white evangelicals' enduring electoral and political loyalties towards the GOP have occupied political scientists and historians for decades, but the causes of such an alliance have still not been fully understood. Up until the 1980 presidential election, evangelicals were roughly as likely to vote Democrat as they were to side with Republican candidates. In the 1976 presidential race, for instance, almost half of white evangelicals (and fifty-six percent of white Baptists) voted for the Georgian Democratic candidate Jimmy Carter. But by the next election white evangelicals had become solidly Republican, and in 1980 sixty-seven percent of white evangelicals voted for the GOP candidate Ronald Reagan.⁶ This electoral devotion has remained persistent ever since, with around eighty percent of conservative evangelicals backing the GOP in the 2000 and 2004 elections, and the movement supporting 2008

former group has the most militant, uncompromising approach towards theology and cultural accommodation, and could be said to include organisations such as Bob Jones University, which was a key player in the build-up of the Christian Right. The latter group is slightly less militant theologically, 'is less vocal and extreme about its separatist posture,' and is 'willing to engage in dialogue with other Orthodox schools of thought'. Since it adheres to the most conservative form of evangelical theology, Bellevue's position is perhaps closer to the Separatist strand of fundamentalism than the Open one. Richard Quebedeaux, *Young Evangelicals: The Story of the Emergence of a New Generation of Evangelicals*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), p. 19, quoted in Kyle, *Evangelicalism*, p. 15.

⁵ See Barry Hankins, *Uneasy in Babylon: Southern Baptist Conservatives and American Culture*, (Tuscaloosa, AL and London: The University of Alabama Press), p. 6.

⁶ Daniel K. Williams, *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right*, (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 193. Meanwhile, Jimmy Carter's share of the southern evangelical vote dropped from 56 percent in 1976 to 34 percent in 1980—an astonishingly sharp and rapid decline in popularity, especially considering Carter was himself a born-again Christian. Evangelicals' preference for Republican candidates has strengthened ever since, with the GOP becoming 'increasingly dependent on its evangelical constituency'. *Ibid*, p. 8.

Republican nominee John McCain 'over Barack Obama by a 3-1 margin'.⁷ Most of the existing literature on the Christian Right has focussed on how the movement's most powerful leaders mobilised evangelical support for conservative "moral" issues and forged strong, politically-lucrative connections with the Republican Party. The historiography's preoccupation with Christian Right's elite is in many ways understandable. Indeed, it was figures like the Lynchburg, Virginia pastor and televangelist Jerry Falwell who 'could claim at least partial responsibility for turning conservative evangelicals into a Republican voting bloc that party strategists could not afford to ignore'.⁸ Not long before the 1980 presidential election, Falwell and others had persuaded Reagan and the right-wing of the Republican Party to adopt an evangelical platform which included proposals to ban abortion, shelve the Equal Rights Amendment and reintroduce state-sponsored school prayer. Thus, in 1980 the United States witnessed an ideological convergence between an insurgent conservative evangelical movement and the GOP, a relationship which leaders such as Falwell were no doubt partially responsible for engineering.

However, despite the obvious necessity of examining the courtship that took place between the Republican and evangelical elites, such a process is a well-trodden topic of research, and more importantly it overlooks how this significant moment in the post-war history of evangelicalism played out at a local level. Individual churches have seldom featured in scholarly attempts to understand contemporary conservative evangelicalism, least of all in the context of the movement's most politically prominent iteration of the twentieth century, the Christian Right. This has resulted in a gap in the field's understanding of an important mechanism through which—as this thesis shows—the movement was involved with politics: congregational culture. It is indeed striking that, despite widespread acknowledgement that the Christian Right was predominantly a "grassroots" phenomenon, there has not been more of an effort to understand how evangelical politics actually operated in America's pews. After all, the success of Falwell and others in building alliances with the Republican Party would have counted for little without the millions of white evangelicals who committed their political allegiances to the GOP between the 1976 and 1980 presidential elections, and who have stayed faithful to the Party ever since. These voters formed the backbone of conservative evangelicalism's late-twentieth century political realignment, but relatively little is known about the local, congregational forces which related to evangelicals' Republicanisation.⁹ Instead, top-down perspectives have dominated the historiography of the movement.

⁷ Daniel K. Williams, "Jerry Falwell's Sunbelt Politics: The Regional Origins of the Moral Majority," *The Journal of Policy History*, Vol. 22, No., 2 (2010), accessed, April 10, 2013, DOI: 10.1017/S0898030610000011, p. 125.

⁸ Williams, *God's Own Party*, p. 193. Much of the Christian Right's success was about 'capitalizing on conservative evangelicals' unease with the social changes taking place in America' ever since the civil rights movement era. In turn, 'Falwell and his allies succeeded in channelling this anxiety about the nation's moral condition into a partisan movement.' *Ibid.*

⁹ As well as poaching a disproportionate share of voters from the Democratic Party in the late 1970s, the Republican Party's success with evangelicals also consisted of rousing what has been described a "sleeping giant" of American politics: the significant number of born-again Protestants who had never voted before. Prior to the emergence of the Christian Right, evangelicals tended to vote a rate of around 60 percent; but in the 1980 election that figure had risen to over 70 percent, compared to the national average of 52 percent. See Jeffrey W. Robbins & Neal Magee (eds.), *The Sleeping Giant Has Awoken: The*

Evangelicals' post-Carter affinities with the Republican Party necessarily included millions of people either switching their political allegiance, engaging politically for the first time, or maintaining their affinity with the GOP. But how was this long-lasting political and electoral loyalty actually formed? Building on studies which have chronicled the political activity of the movement's most powerful leaders, this thesis argues that as well as being a story of elite-level mobilisation the so-called Christian Right was also about the formation of a new political culture at evangelical churches like Bellevue. This entailed a new willingness to apply conservative evangelical principles to what were currently considered to be the pertinent "moral" issues of the period, and it also consisted of an alignment with the broader features of mainstream Republicanism during the 1980s, including a "colour-blind" attitude towards race and segregation and a strong patriotic impulse. This mimicking of key aspects of Christian Right and Republican Party politics helps explain how conservative evangelicalism's longstanding, post-1970s electoral loyalty to the Republican Party was orchestrated at a congregational level.

How was this new form of political culture at key churches like Bellevue formed? Contrary to the conventional narrative of partisan mobilisation that has been applied to evangelical elites, this thesis argues that Bellevue's mirroring of the Christian Right was instead a result of the church's responses to desegregation and its links with a racially-uniform, conservative culture in Memphis's suburbs. As at other large, conservative evangelical churches, Bellevue's leaders avoided making explicit political endorsements from the pulpit. Adrian Rogers, Bellevue's pastor between 1972 and 2005, was heavily involved with Christian Right campaigns outside of his church, but he saw his denominational and political activities as separate from his ministerial duties. Meanwhile, although Rogers' church did become more engaged with key Christian Right issues during the 1980s, the Bellevue pastor resisted making direct partisan political pronouncements in sermons or elsewhere. In the absence of any clear partisan mobilisation, Bellevue's new political culture was in large part a result of more indirect factors. These include Bellevue's theology, which determined how it reacted to demographic change and, most importantly, the church's connections with Memphis's politically and culturally distinct suburbs. In other words, this thesis argues that the interrelationships between congregational culture, race and urban history played a far more important role in shaping post-civil rights era conservative evangelical political culture than previously assumed. This congregational methodology is related to the recent "spatial turn" of American political history, which has been concerned with 'connect[ing] the structural insights of urban studies to the...ideologies of white voters during the modern era'.¹⁰ As this thesis demonstrates, Bellevue's particular brand of theology, the church's growth strategies, and the broader demographic and cultural trends of the Sunbelt South all had indirect but crucially important effects on the political manifestations of conservative evangelicalism during the Reagan era and beyond. By viewing the process through the lens of a shift in the congregational culture of important churches like Bellevue, this thesis helps reconcile the apparent contradiction between conservative evangelicals' allegiances with the

New Politics of Religion in the United States, (New York and London: Continuum International Publishing, 2008).

¹⁰ Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 7.

Republican Party and the simultaneous avoidance of overt forms of political mobilisation in church pulpits.

Scholarship on the Christian Right Since the 1980s

Historian of evangelicalism Darren Dochuk has argued that the lack of studies which examine the congregational culture of white evangelicalism is the result of a historiography which remains 'general and top-down in its orientation'.¹¹ This criticism is most applicable to the first wave of scholarship on the Christian Right. During the height of the Christian Right's political influence, scholars were understandably keen to explain the sudden emergence of political advocacy groups such as the Moral Majority and the Religious Roundtable. One symptom of this focus was a preoccupation with exploring the features of the evangelicalism at its most elite level.¹² As implied by Dochuk, this broad methodological framework was also susceptible to generalisations which tended to obscure some of the finer historical intricacies of the movement. A key example of these overlooked facets has been an understanding of how the congregational cultures of individual churches were connected to the politicisation of conservative evangelicalism. The tendency to generalise has also resulted in oversimplified and short-sighted descriptions of what were, in reality, the extremely complex and deeply-rooted origins of the Christian Right. Conventional wisdom stated that the Christian Right emerged spontaneously in the late 1970s as a reaction to the perceived moral depravities of post-civil rights American society, and a succession of liberal Supreme Court rulings which appeared to violate conservative evangelical attitudes towards "social issues". Meanwhile, it has been assumed that the movement's success was down to its unambiguous and uncompromising approaches towards these issues, which appealed to working class whites who had started to feel disillusioned by the Democratic Party's commitment to African American equality and other progressive initiatives.¹³

Although this narrative is no-doubt part of the story, it fails to capture the complexity of the movement's features and the depth of its historical roots. A new generation of scholars, led by historian of evangelicalism Axel Schafer, has begun to reveal the inadequacy of the first

¹¹ Darren Dochuk, "'Praying for a Wicked City': Congregation, Community, and the Suburbanisation of Fundamentalism', *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (2003), accessed April 8, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/rac.2003.13.2.167?origin=JSTOR-pdf>, p. 186.

¹² For example, Nancy T. Ammerman, *Bible Believers: Fundamentalists and the Modern World* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987); for the links between major financial donors and religious advocacy groups, see James L. Guth and John C. Green, "Politics in a New Key: Religiosity and Participation among Political Activists," *The Western Political Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (March 1990).

¹³ For examples of works stressing this interpretation of the NCR's political mobilisation, see Steve Bruce, *The Rise and Fall of the New Christian Right: Conservative Protestant Politics in America, 1978 – 1988*, (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1990); Kenneth J. Heineman, *God is a Conservative: Religion, Politics, and Morality in Contemporary America*, (New York and London: New York University Press, 1998). Bruce J. Schulman (ed.), *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s*, (USA: Harvard University Press, 2008), in particular the essay by Paul Boyer, "The Evangelical Resurgence in 1970s American Protestantism", pp. 29 – 51; Dan T. Carter sees right-wing politics in the 1970s as a reaction to the racial liberalism of the 1960s: *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich: Race and the Conservative Counterrevolution*, (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1996).

wave's assumptions. Schafer and others have rejected the conventional "backlash" explanation for the Christian Right's mobilisation, challenging it on the grounds that it presents an overly simplistic characterisation of the movement's politics and origins. Schafer argues that to suggest evangelicals simply reacted 'against the cultural changes in the aftermath of the 1960s' is to 'ignore the organisational, personal and even cognitive links between evangelicalism, the Civil Rights movement, the counterculture, and even the New Left'.¹⁴ David R. Swartz has demonstrated, for instance, that the Christian Right's rhetorical style and mobilisation techniques were actually borrowed from the progressive wing of evangelicalism, which had used such strategies over a decade earlier as part of its resistance to several of the sixties' most controversial issues.¹⁵ Thus, rather than being outside of or diametrically opposed to the politics and culture of the sixties—as the somewhat misleading notion of a "culture war" suggests—the 'cross-over between left' and right wings of the movement was more significant than originally thought.¹⁶ These interventions have problematized many of the assumptions made about the Christian Right by complicating the simplistic left/right dichotomy which existed in much of the first wave of scholarship. The historiographical inaccuracies are in some ways a symptom of the broad and top-down methodologies used to analyse the Christian Right, which this thesis intends to avoid via its examination of a case study's congregational culture.

At around the same time as Schafer et al's re-evaluation of the backlash theory, the historiography of political evangelicalism began to broaden its horizons. Amidst the realisation that progressive and conservative facets of the movement were more entwined than previously imagined, David Swartz has published works which reveal the existence an Evangelical Left, which was active in the 1970s despite swimming against the formidable tide of conservative Protestant discourse.¹⁷ Another area of recent interest has been the relationship between the Christian Right and capitalism and consumerism. Darren Dochuk has investigated the connections evangelicals in the Southwest had with the oil industry, demonstrating that that black gold facilitated conservative Protestants' embrace of the emerging political, cultural and economic paradigm of the Sunbelt.¹⁸ Meanwhile, Kevin Kruse has examined the connections between powerful business leaders and evangelicalism in the

¹⁴Schafer, "Religion, the Cold War State" p. 12, emphasis original. For the links between conservative evangelicalism and the sixties counterculture, see Axel R. Schafer, *Countercultural Conservatives: American Evangelicalism from the Postwar Revival to the New Christian Right*, (Madison, Wisconsin, and London, UK: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2011).

¹⁵ David R. Swartz, *Moral Minority: The Evangelical Left in an Age of Conservatism*, (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

¹⁶ Schafer, "Religion, the Cold War State", p. 13. For essays which depict the diversity of evangelical politics and culture in the 1960s, see Axel R. Schafer (ed.), *American Evangelicals and the 1960s*, (USA: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2013).

¹⁷ Swartz, *Moral Minority*. See also "The Evangelical Left and the Move from Personal to Social Responsibility," in Schafer (ed), *American Evangelicals and the 1960s*, pp. 211 – 230.

¹⁸ Darren Dochuk, "Blessed by Oil, Cursed with Crude: God and Black Gold in the American Southwest", *The Journal of American History*, Vol 99, No. 1 (2012), pp. 51 – 61. See also Bethany Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

1930s, arguing that an alliance was forged between the two groups as a response to the New Deal state.¹⁹

Since the new century a handful of fresh interpretations of the origins of the Christian Right have also emerged. Daniel K. Williams has argued convincingly that rather than emerging suddenly as a reaction to the political and cultural liberalism of the 1960s, the Christian Right was in fact a direct descendent of the fundamentalist movement of the 1920s.²⁰ Fundamentalism began as a reaction to the threat posed by theological liberalism, which had been gaining momentum since the late nineteenth century. However, the movement was never concerned solely with purely religious issues. Faced with the growing threat of rival discourses such as evolutionism, Catholicism, and secularism—not to mention changing gender and sexual mores—fundamentalists were determined to use politics to restore the cultural influence of conservative Protestantism. The movement had mixed success during the first few decades of their crusade, ‘but they never lost sight of the political vision that they had formed in the 1920s—the vision of reclaiming America’s Christian identity through politics’.²¹ By the end of the 1940s the movement had matured: fundamentalists now had a political advocacy group based in Washington and were able to act with greater unity behind certain social, economic and foreign policy agendas. More importantly, fundamentalists had begun to create enduring alliances with the Republican Party. At first the movement focussed on developing connections with powerful party leaders such as Richard Nixon, but in the early 1970s conservative evangelicals—who by this point had dropped the “fundamentalist” label because of its pejorative connotations—started exercising a degree of control over the party itself. The Christian Right—with its organisational unity that transcended denominational boundaries, and its power to change ‘the agenda of the [Republican] party,’—was therefore the culmination of over five decades of coordination between different strands of the movement, as well as persistent attempts to infiltrate the halls of power in Washington.²² ‘What was new in 1980 was not evangelicals’ interest in politics but, rather, their level of partisan commitment,’ concludes Williams.²³

In his recent history of modern American evangelicalism, Matthew Avery Sutton reaches similar conclusions to those of Williams.²⁴ Sutton’s aim is to address some of the historiographical oversights made by the first attempts to chronicle the history of American

¹⁹ Kevin M. Kruse, *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America*, (New York: Basic Books, 2015).

²⁰ Williams, *God’s Own Party*.

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 3.

²² *Ibid*. Though the movement was indeed dominated by Protestants, one of the major achievements of the Christian Right was that it managed to recruit conservative Catholics and even Mormons to its cause. According to the conventional narrative, different denominations put aside their theological differences to unite behind certain political issues. This explanation has, however, been rejected by Neil J. Young, who has argued that coalition-building had been occurring amongst conservative Christians for far longer than previously assumed. Instead being a reaction to the political and cultural liberalism of the 1960s, conservative Christians, he argues, formed a coalition to rival that of the mainline Protestant compromise. Neil J. Young, *We Gather Together: The Religious Right and the Problem of Interfaith Politics*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016).

²³ *Ibid*, p. 2.

²⁴ Matthew Avery Sutton, *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism*, (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014).

evangelicalism from its late-nineteenth century origins to the present day.²⁵ This includes investigating female and African American evangelicals, whose voices existed despite the sexist and often racist culture of twentieth century fundamentalism and evangelicalism. Williams' and Sutton's studies differ slightly in terms of their explanations of evangelicalism's engagement with politics. Sutton places a greater emphasis on conservative evangelicals' premillennial eschatology than Williams, who argues the movement's political mobilisation was more to do with its resistance towards secular culture. Nonetheless, Sutton shares Williams' dissatisfaction with the 'rise-fall-rebirth narrative' that dominated discussions of American evangelicalism at the end of the twentieth century.²⁶ He emphasises 'continuity rather than discontinuity,' and argues that 'cultural engagement rather than sectarian isolation remained both a priority and a reality [for conservative evangelicalism] between the nineteenth century and the present'.²⁷ Williams' and Sutton's works both demonstrate that the Christian Right was a direct descendent of an early twentieth century movement which was constantly concerned with penetrating the political domain, but which had simply yet to acquire enough organisational resources to exert a tangible influence on the Republican Party. In this sense both studies are historical accounts of conservative evangelicals' struggle to align their movement with the Republican party and control it from within. A further methodological overlap between Williams' and Sutton's works is their focus on conservative evangelicalism's most influential players, such as Jerry Falwell, who figures particularly heavily in the former's monograph. Another recent example of this approach is Steven P. Miller's study of Billy Graham's career, which examines, amongst other things, the eulogised evangelist's role as mediator between his native region and Richard Nixon's so-called "southern strategy".²⁸

Overall, the latest wave of scholarship has contributed significantly towards the field's understanding of the Christian Right, dispelling numerous myths about the origins and features of the movement. But the historiography's preoccupation with the evangelical elite's connections with the GOP has meant that little attention has been paid to the culture of evangelicalism at a lower organisational level. Darren Dochuk's monograph about "transplanted" southern evangelicals in Southern California is a notable exception to this trend.²⁹ Dochuk's study examines the large number of evangelicals who migrated to the Golden State as part of a mass exodus which saw six million people abandon the economically impoverished South between the 1930s and the 1960s. His findings complement Williams' and Sutton's suggestion that conservative evangelicals were engaged with politics several decades prior to the Christian Right. 'Southern evangelicalism was, from the very beginning, aligned with the forces that created the Sunbelt and embedded in the political processes that upset the

²⁵ This includes the seminal but nevertheless outdated study by George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1980); see also Joel A. Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism*, (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

²⁶ Sutton, *American Apocalypse*, p. xiii.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Steven P. Miller, *Billy Graham and the Rise of the Republican South*, (Philadelphia, PA: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

²⁹ Darren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism*, (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011).

region's Democratic alliances and constructed its Republican Right,' he argues.³⁰ However, rather than focussing solely on the ability of well-known evangelists like Graham to rub shoulders with California's political elite, Dochuk's study also seeks to understand why the culture of Southern California 'proved so welcoming to Graham [and his contemporaries] and nurturing of his worldview'.³¹ He demonstrates that the region, with its culture of competitiveness and its 'decentralised and deregulated suburban layout' turned out to be the 'ideal proving ground' for evangelicals, who favoured congregational independence and who had an unflappable commitment to their religious doctrine.³² Via a network of schools, associations, and organisations that involved evangelicals at every level, the movement developed a strong presence in Southern California and became involved in an eclectic range of issues that related to suburban life, such as tax, housing and work legislation. In sum, by observing 'the southern people who ensured that the religious system took root' in Southern California, Dochuk's study offers an insight into how evangelicalism's involvement in the construction of a New Right played out amongst normal believers, showing that the movement's culture was at least as politically significant as its elite level political alignment.³³

Race, "White Flight" and the Origins of the Christian Right

One important advantage of this thesis's congregational framework is that it pays attention to the voices of those who had considerably less formal power than the evangelical elites, but who nonetheless made up by far the largest numerical constituency of the movement—a group whose political behaviours ultimately facilitated the Christian Right's success. An appreciation of the features of this group's discourses and the dynamics behind their actions will therefore enable a more comprehensive understanding of the broader movement. Additionally, the congregational perspective is also receptive to how the demographic, socioeconomic and political developments of post-war metropolitan environments influenced evangelicalism at a local level. This is particularly important when we consider the context of southern cities like Memphis, which were effected most acutely by the civil rights movement, and which for most of the second half of the twentieth century had larger and politically stronger black populations than their nearest equivalents in the urban Northwest.³⁴ This thesis demonstrates that these historical developments were in fact intimately linked with the build-up of politically active conservative evangelicalism. The most obvious effects of civil rights era desegregation and the subsequent busing rulings were dramatic shifts in the demographic composition of urban environments. As part of a phenomenon known as "white flight", the response of white communities across the nation to the outlawing of racially segregated public spaces—including, most significantly, schools—was an abandonment of inner-city neighbourhoods in favour of suburban locales. In Memphis, the situation was particularly

³⁰ Ibid, p. xxii.

³¹ Ibid, p. xv.

³² Ibid, p. xvii.

³³ Ibid, p. xv.

³⁴ This is one of the exceptions to the phenomenon of regional convergence that took place after the height of the civil rights movement, and has been noted in Kevin M. Kruse's study, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 12.

severe. Throughout the initial stages of busing and beyond, the city had some of the most extreme levels of residential and educational segregation in the whole country. Midtown, where Bellevue had resided ever since its formation in 1903, was one of several areas of the city which experienced considerable levels of post-civil rights demographic change. A historically white neighbourhood, by the end of the 1970s Midtown was majority-black. In 1989, mirroring what countless other white churches in the country had done already, Bellevue completed its own relocation from the inner-city to the suburbs.

Despite the prevalence of white flight in the Protestant context, scholarly investigations of the phenomenon in the Protestant context remain few and far between. The two exceptions to this trend are Dochuk's study of an evangelical congregation in Detroit, and a monograph by Mark Mulder which examines a handful of Chicago churches.³⁵ Dochuk's analysis of Highland Park Baptist Church (HPBC) reveals how the congregation's strong social conscience and willingness to serve a struggling community clashed with the realisation that the church was becoming increasingly incapable of 'offering any substantive response to the changing racial dynamics' of its neighbourhood.³⁶ HPBC's failure to adapt to the rapidly changing socioeconomic, racial and political situation made relocation necessary. But as Dochuk shows, rather than being an inevitable outcome thrust upon the church by outside forces, HPBC's decision to move was also the product of a 'deep ideological transformation' involving theology and community loyalties, in which 'the very spiritual legitimacy of the church' was at stake.³⁷ The example of HPBC therefore 'provides...insight into the multifarious issues, motives and forces that helped sever...ties with community and ultimately facilitate[d] movement to the suburbs'.³⁸ Meanwhile, Mulder's study explores the responses to urban change of inner-city evangelical churches which were affiliated with different denominations. He shows that churches that belonged to certain denominations were more likely to withdraw from their neighbourhoods than churches which had other denominational affiliations. Congregations which had a greater propensity for withdrawal tended to be members of denominations which placed less of an emphasis on community attachments, were more organisationally insular, and which had less institutional authority over individual churches. Overall, these religious facets of white flight complicate the conventional narrative which, at best, assumes that congregations were blindly complicit to urban trends. Both Dochuk's and Mulder's works therefore reveal the wealth of insights that can be gained by paying attention to the religious manifestations, experiences and implications of urban withdrawal. Scholars who 'ignore religious affiliations' in studies of white suburbanisation therefore 'fail to sufficiently assess the social phenomenon' as a whole.³⁹

Studies of urban withdrawal in the evangelical context have added to the considerable amount of work done on white flight in more secular settings. The most valuable contribution

³⁵ Dochuk, "Praying for a Wicked City"; Mark T. Mulder, *Shades of White Flight: Evangelical Congregations and Urban Departure*, (New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2015).

³⁶ Dochuk, "Praying for a Wicked City", p. 178.

³⁷ Ibid, p. 178-9.

³⁸ Ibid, p. 168.

³⁹ Ibid.

these studies have made in terms of this thesis's aims is to enhance the field's understanding of the political effects of post-civil rights white suburbanisation. Kevin Kruse's landmark study of Atlanta traces the development of the strategy of protecting white privilege by maintaining residential segregation.⁴⁰ Rather than being solely an impulsive, physical reaction to desegregation, Kruse argues white flight should also be understood as a political ideology that evolved from its blatantly racist form during the genesis of the civil rights movement into a subtler framework which defended residential segregation in the name "freedom of association", commercial enterprise and "private rights". He shows that this ideology had tangible links with the formation of the New Right, as budding Republican conservatives such as Richard Nixon, Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan began to recognise the political potential of using the same language to exploit the resentments of white working- and middle class voters.

By examining southern cities during the busing era, Matthew Lassiter's study of the "Silent Majority" resumes this story from where Kruse's narrative finishes.⁴¹ In most cities the response of white communities to federally-sponsored school integration during the 1970s was to flee the inner-city in even greater numbers. This was particularly the case in Memphis, which remained one of the most residentially segregated cities in the country throughout the twentieth century. But Lassiter takes issue with the conventional 'white flight thesis' which, he argues, implies that suburbanisation was solely the symptom of individual racism, when in reality it involved deliberate strategies by local politicians and even the federal government to protect white privilege in the suburbs.⁴² The politics of residential segregation during the busing era took the form of a "colour-blind" discourse which saw white privilege in the suburbs as the product of individual meritocracy 'rather than the unconstitutional product of structural racism'.⁴³ As part of the recent scholarly trend of eschewing top-down perspectives in favour of examining conservative ideologies and behaviours at a more subaltern level, both Kruse's and Lassiter's works deal with the politics of suburban white privilege from the perspective of local communities. This dissertation applies these insights about the formation of a conservative suburban discourse to the context of white evangelicalism, demonstrating that it helped create a new political culture in churches like Bellevue.

By virtue of its detailed analysis of how the urban history of a racially divided city related to the congregational culture of an important megachurch, race and segregation are inevitably central themes of this dissertation. Undoubtedly the most important and influential scholarly work of the last twenty years to tackle the issue of white evangelicalism's thorny post-war relationship with desegregation and racial equality has been Michael Emerson and Christian Smith's *Divided by Faith*.⁴⁴ Their study has inspired recent work on the Evangelical Racial Change movement and its attempts to achieve racial reconciliation in evangelical

⁴⁰ Kruse, *White Flight*. See also the seminal work by Thomas J. Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996, 2005).

⁴¹ Lassiter, *The Silent Majority*. See also Matthew D. Lassiter, "The Suburban Origins of 'Color-Blind' Conservatism: Middle Class Consciousness in the Charlotte Busing Crisis," *Journal of Urban History*, Vol. 30, No. 4, (2004), accessed April 10, 2015, DOI:10.1177/0096144204263812.

⁴² Ibid, p. 9.

⁴³ Ibid, p. 1.

⁴⁴ Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*, (Oxford, England: Oxford University press, 2000).

churches.⁴⁵ Emerson and Smith argue that the greatest challenge confronting attempts to integrate evangelical churches has been the seemingly irreconcilable gulf between black and white theological worldviews. Whereas African American churches tend to be sensitive to the structural roots of racial inequality, white congregations like Bellevue are far more likely to perceive injustice solely in individual terms. This has resulted in a widespread trend in white evangelical culture to ignore or deny the existence of racial inequality.⁴⁶ This thesis will show that these theological explanations for white evangelical churches' racial conservatism are applicable to the case study of Bellevue. Unsurprisingly for a theologically conservative church, Bellevue has always prioritised evangelism over other initiatives such as social gospel. This had clear implications for the church's prospects for racial integration and its willingness to engage with racial inequality in Memphis.

Beyond this theological explanation for the lack of racial reconciliation within the evangelical movement, there have also been a handful of attempts to understand the Christian Right's relationship with race. It is true to say that the subject of race has, alas, been somewhat neglected in a historiography which has too-often focussed narrowly on the Christian Right's ostensible preoccupations with abortion, the family and church-state separation. Studies which have highlighted the centrality of race in the mobilisation conservative evangelicals include Carolyn Dupont's excellent study of white evangelicals in Mississippi between 1945 and 1975.⁴⁷ Dupont shows that during the civil rights movement conservative evangelicals often used theological disagreements as a smokescreen behind which to advance more sinister, segregationist agendas. More provocatively, she argues that the lingering resentments of Southern Baptist conservatives towards their liberal coreligionists over the issue of segregation were the root cause of the late-1970s Conservative Resurgence, a successful attempt to banish theological liberalism from the denomination. 'It was only in response to progressive attempts to engineer a far-reaching and meaningful response to America's racial crisis... [that the] disparities' between liberals and conservatives of the SBC begin to 'appear insufferable,' she argues.⁴⁸ Dartmouth College scholar Randall Balmer applies a similar interpretation to the Christian Right. Balmer argues that the origins of politicised evangelicalism are rooted in the movement's resistance to the newly-authorised powers of the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) to withdraw tax exemption status from

⁴⁵ See Nancy D. Wadsworth, *Ambivalent Miracles: Evangelicals and the Politics of Racial Healing*, (Charlottesville, VA and London: University of Virginia Press, 2014).

⁴⁶ See also the recent follow-up to Emerson and Smith's study, J. Russel Hawkins and Phillip Luke Sinitiere (eds), *Christians and the Color Line: Race and Religion After Divided by Faith*, (Oxford, England, Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁴⁷ Carolyn Renee Dupont, *Mississippi Praying: Southern White Evangelicals and the Civil Rights Movement, 1945 – 1975*, (New York and London: New York University Press, 2012); additionally, Barry Hankins spends one chapter of his monograph on the SBC's relationship with contemporary American culture on the subject of race: Barry Hankins, *Uneasy in Babylon: Southern Baptist Conservatives and American Culture*, (Tuscaloosa and London: The University of Alabama Press, 2002). See also Carter, *From George Wallace*; Joseph Crespino, "Civil Rights and the Religious Right," in Schulman (ed.) *Rightward Bound*, pp. 90 – 105.

⁴⁸ Dupont, *Mississippi Praying*, p. 202.

segregated Christian schools and Colleges.⁴⁹ Balmer seeks to debunk what he sees as the myth that it was the 1973 *Roe V. Wade* Supreme Court ruling that motivated conservative evangelicals to form a political movement. He concedes that by the time president Jimmy Carter had begun his campaign for re-election, resisting abortion had indeed become the cornerstone of the Christian Right's campaign against liberalism; but this was not because of a deep-seated moral objection to abortion, he writes, but rather because 'the anti-abortion crusade was more palatable than the religious right's real motive: protecting segregated schools'.⁵⁰

Two years prior to *Roe*, another Supreme Court decision—*Green V. Connally*—had ruled that independent schools which practiced racial segregation were unconstitutional and therefore ineligible for tax exemption status. The ruling incensed conservative evangelicals such as Jerry Falwell, who argued it infringed religious freedom. "In some states," Falwell fumed, "It's easier to open a massage parlor than a Christian school".⁵¹ Meanwhile, Balmer cites numerous evangelical sources from the 1970s which display an initial indifference towards or even approval of *Roe*; his most surprising quotation comes from the notorious Southern Baptist conservative and one-time segregationist W. A. Criswell, who said shortly after the *Roe* ruling that "I have always felt that it was only after the child was born and had a life separate from its mother that it became an individual person, and it has always, therefore, seemed to me that what is best for the mother and for the future should be allowed".⁵² A few years later, in 1976, after numerous warnings from the IRS, the fundamentalist Bob Jones University had its tax exemption status rescinded after it continuously refused to racially integrate its campus.⁵³ This, according to Balmer, was 'the

⁴⁹ Randall Balmer, "The Real Origins of the Religious Right", *Politico Magazine*, May 27, 2014, accessed April 6, 2016, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/05/religious-right-real-origins-107133?o=0>.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Jerry Falwell, quoted in *ibid*.

⁵² W. A. Criswell, quoted in *Ibid*. It is important, however, to handle such quotations with caution. Whereas Balmer treats Criswell's statement at face value—as part of his thesis that the abortion issue was suddenly and arbitrarily raised by powerful evangelicals with a vested interest in protecting segregation—other scholars are warier of exaggerating its significance. Barry Hankins, for example, has appealed for a more nuanced historical perspective: 'While this statement could be touted as clear evidence for a pro-choice ideology in SBC history, it is more likely evidence of how little Southern Baptists had thought about abortion before the *Roe* decision. Once they began to think through the implications, it did not take long for Southern Baptist conservatives to develop a strong pro-life position. Shortly after Criswell's statement, the SBC right wing began efforts to pass an anti-abortion resolution [within the denomination]'. Hankins, *Uneasy in Babylon*, p. 169. Meanwhile, historian of the Christian Right Daniel Williams suggests that the IRS controversy 'was a seminal event in mobilising Christian conservatives,' but 'it would not have had the same impact had it not been preceded by a series of other evangelical campaigns against government policies'. Williams, *God's Own Party*, p. 164.

⁵³ Meanwhile, Christian schools which had less hard-line stances towards integration than Bob Jones University were not immune to IRS scrutiny. Many 'claimed that they did not discriminate...But Christian schools [nonetheless] made no attempt to attract minority students, and the political and social conservatism that pervaded many Christian schools repelled the majority of African Americans. Rather than create new minority scholarships or encourage minority recruitment, Christian schools lobbied congress to prevent the IRS from enforcing its new policy'. Williams, *God's Own Party*, p. 163.

final straw' for Falwell et al.⁵⁴ The resentments created among evangelical leaders by the IRS debacle were seen as a good opportunity to mobilise participants behind a crusade against liberalism.⁵⁵ In particular, political activist Paul Weyrich, who had been trying unsuccessfully for years to unite evangelicals across the country to 'form a formidable voting block', saw this as the right time.⁵⁶ But Weyrich, Falwell and other politically savvy leaders knew that to wage such a war on racial or segregation terms would be political suicide: these concerns 'had worked to rally the leaders, but they needed a different issue if they wanted to mobilize evangelical voters on a large scale'.⁵⁷ Accordingly, and spurred on by the realisation that many conservative Americans had started to feel anxious about the increase in the number of recorded pregnancy terminations since *Roe*, they decided that abortion would be the key issue around which to mobilise conservative evangelicals.

This thesis is primarily concerned with the dynamics of conservative evangelicalism at a congregational level. It therefore does not directly engage with Balmer's findings, which are related to the movement's elite-level mobilisation. Nonetheless, like Balmer this thesis does argue that race played an important role in the build-up of a politicised form of conservative evangelicalism that by 1980 displayed disproportionately high electoral loyalty towards the Republican Party. However, this thesis contends that race played a more indirect role than is suggested in Balmer's analysis. Rather than being a hostile reaction to racially progressive legislation, this thesis argues the build-up of politicised evangelicalism was about the creation of a conservative political culture at churches like Bellevue which was in part a symptom of how evangelical congregational culture interacted with racial and demographic processes in urban environments during the civil rights era and beyond. This congregational analysis supports Emerson and Smith's finding that conservative evangelical theology acted as a barrier in the way of racial reconciliation at white churches during the desegregation era. In the case of Bellevue, the existence of this theological barrier during the local neighbourhood's rapid demographic transformation helped establish the racial fault lines for a new form of congregational culture. While theology helped establish the divisions necessary for its formation, the major creative force behind this new culture was not partisan political mobilisation in the church's pulpit, but rather Bellevue's connections with the formation of Memphis's politically and culturally distinct—and racially uniform—"island suburbs".⁵⁸ As part of the region-wide economic development trends of the Sunbelt South, which were aided by federal policy and accentuated by white flight, Memphis's burgeoning neighbourhoods on the eastern fringes of the city soon became havens for young, conservative and middle class whites—the exact demographic which Adrian Rogers sought to attract during his long tenure as Bellevue's senior pastor. Therefore, although Bellevue remained at its Midtown location up until 1989, the church's congregational culture was being transformed long before then. As

⁵⁴ Balmer, "The Real Origins of the Religious Right".

⁵⁵ Balmer's claims are indeed supported by personal accounts of various evangelical leaders who were a part of the anti-IRS backlash. Baptist school administrator Robert Billings, for example, argued that the IRS debate did "more to bring Christians together than any man since Apostle Paul". Quoted in Williams, *God's Own Party*, p. 164.

⁵⁶ Balmer, "The Real Origins of the Religious Right".

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ "Island suburb" is a term borrowed from Lassiter, *The Silent Majority*.

outlined in greater detail below, thanks in part to Bellevue's connections with the suburbs by the early 1980s aspects of the church's congregational culture had started to mirror the political features of the Christian Right and the Republican party.

Thesis methodologies and structure

This thesis presents a new reading of post-war southern evangelicalism by examining the understudied dimension of congregational culture. Via the case study of Bellevue, it tells the story of how white evangelicalism at a local level interacted with social and structural phenomena in Memphis. By doing so, it reinterprets some of the movement's key late-twentieth century moments. The project has relied on a variety of different primary and secondary sources. Bellevue's on-campus archive houses an extensive array of church documents, ranging from day-to-day correspondences to a complete collection of its weekly Bulletin, the *Bellevue Baptist Messenger*. This thesis's understanding of Bellevue's history would not have been possible without access to this archive. Another crucial resource has been Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archive, in Nashville, Tennessee, which houses numerous documents about Bellevue and has been particularly useful for understanding Dr Rogers' SBC presidency. Meanwhile, the experiences of worshipping at Bellevue have been illuminated considerably by the many people interviewed for this project. Lastly, the completion of this dissertation has involved synthesising the wide array of secondary sources required for understanding the post-1960 social and racial history of Memphis, southern evangelicalism and the SBC. Chapter 1 begins with a contextual background of our case study's history from its establishment in 1903 to the 1950s. Bellevue's early twentieth century origins attest to how modest it initially was in comparison to the more established Protestant institutions in Memphis. The church was founded over eighty years after the establishment of the River City, and throughout the nineteenth century and for some time afterwards the First Baptist and Central Baptist congregations had the lion's share of Memphis's evangelical resources. But from its humble beginnings as a one-room chapel to the east of Downtown, Bellevue grew steadily during the 1910s and 1920s. In 1927 the arrival of Dr Robert G. Lee, whose fiery preaching style and uncompromising inerrantist theology resonated with white Memphis's deeply conservative religious culture, accelerated Bellevue's growth and by end of the 1950s the church had effectively overtaken its rivals to become the city's largest evangelical congregation.

The main focus of Chapter 1 is Bellevue during the height of the civil rights movement, and the question of how the church responded to the federal and grassroots desegregation initiatives that affected Memphis from the 1950s. Shortly after the turn of the 1960s, Bellevue inaugurated its first new pastor in over thirty years, Dr Ramsey Pollard, whose tenure represented something of an interim period between the church's two most successful pastorates. But while Pollard was not notable for his popularity, his tenure corresponded to an important period in evangelical history, when large southern churches like Bellevue were, after decades of obliviousness, finally forced to engage with the issues of race and segregation. Chapter 1 demonstrates that while conservative and liberal factions of the church's mother denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention, were embroiled in a bitter conflict over the biblical implications of racial segregation, Bellevue made a conscious effort to position itself

in the ideological centre of discourses on race. This meant, on one hand, that the church tried to distance itself from the blatant racism that plagued much of the SBC. For example, during his tenure pastor Pollard publically declared that there was no biblical rationale for segregated worship. Meanwhile, when confronted early on in Pollard's tenure by "kneel-in" protestors, who were the first campaigners to attempt to force integrated worship in southern churches, the congregation did its best to ensure that Bellevue was a space where blacks were tolerated. On the other hand, at the same time as this willingness to be racially moderate, Bellevue never made any active attempts to attract African Americans to its pews and thereby fully practice racial integration; it had what Chapter 1 refers to as a *laissez-faire* approach towards racial integration, in that it tolerated blacks if they were present but it did not actively seek them, as their more liberal coreligionists sometimes had a tendency to do. This type of racial centrism was relatively widespread in white evangelical churches during the civil rights movement, and Chapter 1 outlines the historical, theological and attitudinal causes of this phenomenon. But these origins are, in the context of this thesis, less important than the legacies of this approach in the post-civil rights world, which are the next chapter's main concern.

Chapter 2 covers the first ten years of Dr Adrian Rogers' pastorate at Bellevue, which would become the most successful tenure in the church's history. Rogers arrived in 1972 to a church that was in state of decline, after twelve years of stagnation under Pollard. Pledging to bring Bellevue back to its glory days under Lee, Rogers duly ushered in a prolonged era of stunning growth at the church which began almost as soon as he arrived and lasted throughout his tenure. Indeed, by the time of Rogers' death in 2005, Bellevue had become one of the largest and most famous churches in the whole country. Chapter 2 attempts to understand the reasons for Bellevue's success under Rogers, but the main purpose of the chapter is to explore how this growth related to a handful of important religious, racial and urban developments that were taking place in the 1970s. It demonstrates that Bellevue's links with the phenomenon of "white flight" in Memphis created a "suburbanised" congregational environment at Bellevue which facilitated both the church's political culture during the 1980s and its relocation to the city's suburbs in 1989. In the 1970s, desegregation and busing effected Bellevue's Midtown neighbourhood dramatically, with the district receiving a large number of new African American residents. But despite the changing racial composition of Midtown, Bellevue maintained its *laissez-faire* approach towards attracting ethnic minorities. In other words, its method of attracting new members did not entail "reaching out" to the local neighbourhood's burgeoning African American population; instead, Bellevue's renaissance under Dr Rogers involved attracting whites with a younger and more affluent socioeconomic profile than those who had attended the church during the Pollard era.⁵⁹ As in other cities in the Sunbelt South, these whites had begun to flock to Memphis's suburbs from neighbourhoods like Midtown and further afield as a symptom of white flight and of an economic boom in the South which disproportionately benefitted whites. As important studies on the "Silent Majority" have demonstrated, the concentration of conservative whites in the suburbs of southern cities like Memphis created a new conservative political paradigm

⁵⁹ This process mirrored what was happening to the movement at a broader level. 'For most of the century, evangelicals lagged behind mainline Protestants in wealth and education, but in the early 1970s they began to close the gap'. Williams, *God's Own Party*, p. 6.

which the Republican Party actively embraced.⁶⁰ Chapter 2 shows that by attracting this demographic Bellevue allowed itself to become more aligned with the political and cultural paradigm of the suburbs, a process which begun almost ten years prior to the conservative evangelical movement's actual embracement of the Republican party, and which is further evidenced in Chapter 4's direct analysis of the church's congregational culture during the 1980s.

The late 1970s and early 1980s were decisive years for the formation of a unified, trans-denominational group of politically mobilised conservatives that became known as the Christian Right. One of the most important achievements of the Christian Right was to gain the support of the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest Protestant denomination in the country. Chapter 3 examines the role played by Rogers and Bellevue's most politically active layman, former business executive Ed McAteer, in forging an alliance between the Christian Right, the SBC and the Republican Party. It focusses on Rogers' and McAteer's joint campaign to reverse the 1962 *Engel Vs. Vitale* Supreme Court case which ruled that government sponsorship of school prayer was unconstitutional. It is argued that Rogers and McAteer focussed their efforts on the school prayer initiative as a way of resisting what they saw as the increasing hostility of the federal government towards religion, and as a way of furthering the SBC's "Conservative Resurgence". In 1982, thanks largely to the efforts of Rogers and McAteer, SBC conservatives managed to achieve a crucial reversal of its separationist church-state position. This in turn enabled the denomination to officially endorse the Republican Party's proposals to ban abortion and reintroduce school prayer, thereby confirming the SBC's involvement with the Christian Right. This analysis is, of course, carried out with a view to understanding how this activity related to Bellevue. Chapter 3 concludes with a discussion of how Rogers and other leading conservative evangelical pastors hesitated about bringing these ostensibly partisan political matters directly into the pulpits of their churches. This was in part because they viewed political activity as potentially corrupting the purity of the evangelical message. In the case of Rogers, it was also because he attempted to construct a separation between his denominational duties as president of the SBC and his ministerial responsibilities as a pastor. This paradox problematizes the notion that the Christian Right was the product of direct political mobilisation; however, it is consistent with this thesis's suggestion that conservative evangelical engagement with Republican politics occurred through a shift in congregational culture which was itself a symptom of indirect forces.

The penultimate chapter discusses Bellevue during the 1980s, carrying out a direct analysis of the church's congregational culture during the peak of the Christian Right's influence. It demonstrates that the combined effect of the church's last three decades of history—as described in previous chapters—was the creation of a political culture which mirrored several defining features of Christian Right and Republican Party conservatism during the 1980s. As well as acknowledging that Bellevue has always harboured a deeply conservative theology which is perhaps inherently compatible with political conservatism, Chapter 4 contends that from around the late 1970s the church had nonetheless started to channel its brand of conservatism in novel ways. One important component of this newly-formed political culture was a propensity for applying its conservative evangelical principles to what had become the key Christian Right political issues of the period. For example,

⁶⁰ See Lassiter, *The Silent Majority*.

although Rogers continued to refrain from making explicit partisan endorsements from the pulpit, in the 1980s he had begun to preach to his congregation about the evangelical duty of voting according to moral principle (one sermon addressing evangelical politics even took place just three days before the 1980 presidential election). Some Bellevue laypeople even took this a step further by explicitly suggesting that Bellevue's brand of conservatism was tied closely to voting Republican. Bellevue's congregational culture during the 1980s also consisted of a patriotic zeal which was reminiscent of the cold war-era jingoism of the Republican Party under Reagan. Chapter 4 is careful not to exaggerate the extent of this shift in the congregational culture of Bellevue; it underlines the existence of a large proportion of the eleven thousand-strong membership at the church which was disengaged from denominational issues and saw their faith as being separate from the political world. But the chapter nonetheless contends that portions of the congregation were more receptive to the ideologies and agendas of the Christian Right and the Republican Party during this period than they had been before. Contrary to popular assumptions about the origins of the Christian Right, this was not the result of a spontaneous decision by Rogers to suddenly involve his church more with conservative politics; rather, it was primarily a symptom of a subtler shift in the congregational culture of Bellevue and the experiences of attending the church—a shift which took over two decades to be completed and which was the result of the church's relationship with the events and forces of the 1960s and 1970s.

In 1989 Bellevue completed its relocation from Midtown—an ethnically diverse neighbourhood where the church had resided for eighty-six years—to a suburban site almost fifteen miles east of Memphis's downtown centre, where around ninety percent of the neighbourhood's residents were white. By abandoning a racially mixed inner-city area and moving to a more demographically "appropriate" area in the suburbs, Bellevue mirrored a process that had been taking place for several decades at evangelical congregations in dozens of cities across the United States. But despite the prevalence of evangelical "white flight", little academic attention has been devoted towards understanding the phenomenon, and even less has been directed to the situation in the South, where some of the most extreme cases of post-busing residential segregation have occurred.

As one of the first academic studies of white flight in a southern evangelical context, the complex causes of Bellevue's suburbanisation are the main subject of this thesis's final chapter. By the time the issue was put to a vote at the church in 1983, the vast majority of Bellevue's leaders and members were overwhelmingly in favour of the relocation. Chapter 5 argues that the principle reason for this massive congregational mandate was the church's lack of connections with its surrounding community. This enabled the church to easily adapt to, and indeed openly embrace, the prospect of urban withdrawal. Bellevue's lack of neighbourhood connections was due to a combination of factors. Firstly, the church's inerrantist theology, which was radically oriented towards individual responsibility and which overlooked the existence of systematic, structural forms of inequality, meant that close neighbourhood connections or social ministry were never considered to be a vital part of the church's ministerial or congregational identity. Secondly, as outlined in Chapter 2, the increasing number of Bellevue laypeople who were based in the suburbs gave Bellevue a strong pragmatic rationale for the relocation. And thirdly, Bellevue's lack of willingness to actively attract the African American population that had arrived in Midtown over the last

two decades further increased the likelihood of the relocation. As Chapter 5 demonstrates, Bellevue's model of megachurch growth centred on targeting the most "reachable" racial group; moreover, the culture of political conservatism that was created during the post-civil rights era also had the side-effect of deterring African Americans from joining the church.

This thesis's historical and cultural analysis of Bellevue Baptist Church between 1960 and 1990 examines how congregational culture was influenced by broader political, socioeconomic and demographic forces that existed in racially divided southern cities like Memphis. The findings detailed in the following chapters are important because they offer an alternative reading of conservative evangelicals' post-1970s engagement with politics. This thesis argues that as well as being about direct, partisan political mobilisation, the so called "Christian Right" was also about the creation of a conservative political culture at churches like Bellevue which facilitated the movement's recent political and electoral allegiances with the Republican Party. From the 1980s onwards Bellevue displayed a new willingness to apply conservative evangelical principles to what had been identified as they most important "moral" issues of the period. At the same time, the congregation began to mirror key features of Republican Party conservatism, including a "colour-blind" approach towards race and a strong patriotism. But Bellevue's political-cultural alignment with the Christian Right and the GOP had little or nothing to do with political mobilisation. Rogers avoided making partisan political endorsements from the pulpit of his church. Instead, the creation of Bellevue's new form of political culture was in large part a symptom of the church's relationship with demographic and socioeconomic change in Memphis. Bellevue's de-facto racially uniform model of church growth, its conservative theology, and its complicity with the socioeconomic and political implications of "white flight" and suburbanisation had indirect but profoundly important effects on the congregational culture of the church. Although partisan political mobilisation undoubtedly played an important role in the courtship between Christian Right and Republican Party elites, this thesis demonstrates that at a congregational level — the arena where the numerical majority of conservative evangelicals resided — Republicanisation was also rooted in the local dynamics of urban history.

Chapter 1: Bellevue Baptist Church and the Civil Rights Movement, 1954 – 1970

White evangelicalism's relationship with the civil rights movement has been the subject of a large amount of historiographical attention in recent decades. Interest has mainly centred on the degree of evangelical churches' complicity with racial inequality and segregation. Some have argued that a key reason why southern churches remained stubbornly segregated throughout the civil rights era and beyond was that white Protestant congregations were essentially indifferent towards the struggle for racial equality.⁶¹ According to this interpretation, congregations neither actively defended nor resisted segregation and racism, but instead turned a blind eye to the rapidly transforming political situation in the South. Meanwhile, the cultural captivity thesis initiated by John Eighmy four and half decades ago contended that white churches were often anti-racist but were nonetheless being "held hostage" by the dominant surrounding culture of southern racism.⁶² Conversely, scholars such as Carolyn Dupont have shown that white evangelicals—particularly those of the Southern Baptist persuasion—systematically resisted the civil rights movement in order to protect the racial status quo.⁶³ The three interpretations are not mutually exclusive, since in reality white evangelicalism in the South was a relatively broad spectrum of approaches towards desegregation and racial equality

This chapter examines Bellevue's own policies towards racial equality and integration as a means to understanding the long-term effects of these approaches. It chronicles the history of the church during the federal and civil desegregation initiatives of the 1950s and 1960s, during what was a pivotal decade for southern religion and the Southern Baptist Convention in particular. Chapter 1 begins by introducing the history of Bellevue during the first half of the twentieth century, as it evolved from being a small, one-room chapel in East Memphis to one of the largest congregations in the region—an early example of a megachurch. The main aim of this chapter is to understand Bellevue's own approach towards the prospect of integrated worshipping in a period when white churches across the region were being forced, one way or another, to engage with the issue of America's "race problem". This, it is hoped, will lay the foundations for an understanding of the *legacies* of Bellevue's integration policy, which subsequent chapters are concerned with discussing. In 1960, Bellevue inaugurated its first new pastor in over thirty years, Dr Ramsey Pollard. the beginning of the 1960s was also when Bellevue would come into direct contact with civil desegregation initiatives that were spreading across the South. On a handful of occasions, the church became a venue for the "kneel-in" movement, which involved African American protestors attempting to worship at "de-facto" white churches during Sunday services. By forcing Bellevue to construct a tangible policy towards racial integration, such events offer a

⁶¹ Samuel S. Hill, Jr., *Southern Churches in Crisis*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966); David L. Chappell, *Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

⁶² John Lee Eighmy, *Churches in Cultural Captivity: A History of the Social Attitudes of Southern Baptists* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1972).

⁶³ Dupont, *Mississippi Praying*.

meaningful insight into how the church's approach towards race compared with the broader denominational and regional situation.

This chapter argues that while the SBC was in the midst of a civil war over the biblical implications of segregation and racial inequality, in the 1960s Bellevue positioned itself on the ideological centre of discourses on race. The church's reactions to the protestors—as well as comments made by pastor Pollard at the time and the recollections of living Bellevue laypeople who were members of the church during the 1960s—indicate that Bellevue was neither committed to upholding segregation, nor invested in actively promoting racial equality. African Americans were allowed to enter the church and, unlike at other large white congregations in the city, their presence did not cause any major disputes within the congregation. Meanwhile, in the wake of the kneel-ins Pollard publically clarified his moderate position on segregation, declaring that he believed there was no biblical or ethical reason why whites and blacks should worship separately. However, unlike his more progressive coreligionists, Pollard never spoke out against racial inequality, nor did he make any attempt to meaningfully desegregate the church or “reach out” to the neighbourhood's African American population. Instead, the congregation had what this chapter suggests was a “laissez-faire” approach towards desegregation: that is, its practices resembled that of the city of Memphis itself, which adopted an ideologically moderate stance towards race but which was extremely slow to implement the *Brown* Supreme Court ruling and spent most of the 1960s deferring integration or offering “token desegregation”.⁶⁴ This laissez-faire approach towards race, it is argued, was the result of the church's particular brand of theology, as well as its assumptions about racially segregated worshiping in the post-*Brown*, post-civil rights South. As subsequent chapters will show, the legacy of this moderate, laissez-faire approach towards integration was that it laid the racial fault lines for relocation and even the creation of a new conservative political culture at the church.

Robert G. Lee and the Making of a Megachurch

On the evening of November 5, 1949, a thousand people assembled on North Bellevue Avenue in Midtown Memphis to witness the ceremonial ground-breaking of Bellevue Baptist Church's forthcoming and highly anticipated new sanctuary, located a hundred yards north of the old building. As laypeople chanted “we will break this ground,” leaders of the church took turns to dig earth on the site of the new \$1.2m facility. Bellevue's charismatic pastor, Dr Robert G. Lee, who was about to begin his second of three terms as president of the Southern Baptist Convention, declined the spading honours, insisting Robert R. Meadows, who was chairman of the church's building committee, take his place. As Meadows began digging the first furrows of earth on the site, Pastor Lee, who was dressed in his trademark white suit, stood upon a ‘paper-covered platform’ and thanked God for the “Bible—the inspired, infallible, inerrant Word of God”.⁶⁵ The utterance that Lee made from upon his podium not

⁶⁴ Daniel Kiel, “Exploded Dreams: Desegregation in the Memphis City Schools”, *Law and Equality* (The University of Minnesota Law School, Summer 2008), p. 263.

⁶⁵ “First Earth Turned at New Church Site”, *The Commercial Appeal*, November 7, 1949. Buildings – Sanctuary (1952) folder, DMCF.

only affirmed the theological orientation that he and his church were faithful towards; the act also embodied two of the major reasons for Bellevue's recent success. Firstly, taking place during the ground-breaking of what would become one of the movement's largest sanctuaries, Lee's gesture symbolised the dramatic post-war growth of the conservative evangelicalism. In the context of his audience Lee's staunch inerrantism was uncontroversial, but Bellevue's theological conservatism was a central explanation for why so many Memphians had been flocking to the church in recent decades. Secondly, the presence of Dr Lee was in itself significant. Through a combination of preaching charisma, pastoral skill and raw ambition, Lee played an important role in transforming Bellevue from a medium sized, Depression-era congregation into one of the largest and most famous churches in the whole region, and indeed the nation.

Two and a half years after the round-breaking, on April 27, 1952, the new sanctuary, 'of simple Georgian colonial design', was ready for its first Sunday service. Few churches in the city, or even the state, compared in size to the new home of Bellevue Baptist.⁶⁶ It was the 'largest church building in Tennessee', and 'seated 3000 in the sanctuary in opera seats' — comfortably more than any other church in Memphis. But even these undeniably impressive facilities could not cope with the demand to witness the first services of the building's opening weekend. Over five thousand people were squeezed into the auditorium that Sunday, requiring the use of an additional two thousand folding chairs to accompany the church's permanent seating. Some reports even suggested that a further two and a half thousand people were 'turned away at the morning service', because there was simply not enough space to safely accommodate them in the sanctuary.⁶⁷

Bellevue's new facilities—as well as the sheer demand to worship there—were above all a testament to the exceptional growth that the church had enjoyed throughout Dr Lee's pastorate. But prior to Lee's arrival there was little to suggest that within the space of a few decades Bellevue would eventually become one of the South's leading evangelical churches. Bellevue was originally founded at the turn of the twentieth century as a splinter congregation from the successful Central Baptist Church. At the end of the nineteenth century Memphis was still recovering from a tumultuous period of war and Reconstruction. But even more devastating for the city was a succession of deadly yellow fever outbreaks during the 1870s, which resulted in over twenty thousand fatalities. Aside from the number of deaths caused as a result of the epidemic, the most significant symptom of yellow fever in Memphis was the mass withdrawal of the city's middle and upper classes. This transformed the social makeup of the city, so that there was a higher proportion of poor blacks and whites than there were in other large southern cities such as Atlanta and New Orleans. Meanwhile, as higher-paying jobs began to disappear, Memphis's proximity to the Mississippi Delta favoured the city's lower-skilled cotton industries. Once yellow fever had been eradicated thousands of economically impoverished citizens and new immigrants flocked to Memphis in search of work, and by the beginning of the twentieth century the population of the city had reached 100,000 (although the city's annexation of surrounding areas also contributed towards the population increase). As the city's inhabitants crept eastwards the demand for evangelical

⁶⁶ John Carruth, "New Bellevue Baptist Combines Breath-Taking Beauty and Size", *The Commercial Appeal*, April 12, 1952, Buildings – Sanctuary (1952) folder, DMCF.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

churches outside of Downtown increased. ‘The Pastor and people of Central Baptist Church’ had taken ‘note of the city’s eastwards expansion’ and duly ‘began a mission on the outskirts of Memphis to reach more people for the glory of God’.⁶⁸

Central Baptist’s mission in the east of the city officially became Bellevue Baptist Church in the summer of 1903. Although the location of the church on the corner of Bellevue and Erskine Avenues eventually evolved into an urban, de facto “inner-city” environment, in the early twentieth century the neighbourhood of what would become Midtown was effectively on the outskirts of the city’s ever-expanding eastern frontier. According to a Bellevue charter member at the time, Bellevue Avenue was little more than a “pig path”, and all that surrounded the small, one-room chapel that was Bellevue’s first sanctuary were strawberry fields. Despite the church’s humble origins Bellevue’s early leaders had the ambition to expand the church’s ministry, and by 1909 there were already plans to build a new Sunday school. The tenures of the first two pastors at Bellevue lasted a combined total of just eighteen years, a relatively short period in comparison with the church’s most successful preachers. And although the pastorate of Dr William M. Bostick, Dr Lee’s predecessor, was just as brief, it was under his leadership that the rate of Bellevue’s growth started to increase considerably. A few years after the arrival of Bostick Bellevue’s membership stood at 1,400, and the church knocked down its old chapel and replaced it with a large, 1,000 seat sanctuary. According to an official history of Bellevue published to celebrate the church’s centenary, Dr Bostick was an ‘evangelist at heart’ who ‘led revivals that sparked the Bellevue spirit’.⁶⁹ In other words, Bostick was the first Bellevue preacher to place a strong emphasis on evangelism and membership growth—two hallmarks which would become cornerstones of the church’s congregational identity in the future.

While Bostick may have initiated Bellevue’s strong emphasis on evangelism and congregational growth, it was the church’s fourth pastor, Dr Lee, who succeeded in completing its transformation from a modest church on the fringes of Memphis to regionally recognised megachurch. Lee, who was already something of a celebrity in southern evangelical circles, brought to Bellevue the kind of glamour and charisma that the church had been lacking up until his arrival. He is often considered Bellevue’s first “great preacher”, in that his ambition, preaching prowess, pastoral skill, and loyalty helped elevate the congregation’s status and growth.⁷⁰ But perhaps most importantly, Lee was deeply and unashamedly conservative, both in theological terms and in a broader sense. He identified liberalism as one of his enemies, hating it for “go[ing] nowhere so fast it arrives out of breath, talking more and more of less and less”.⁷¹ Meanwhile, as an indication of the pastor’s inerrantist credentials, ‘from the beginning, Dr Lee made it clear that the Bible was the Word of God without equivocation’.⁷² Lee’s outspoken anti-liberalism, combined with his strict theological conservatism, meant that the charismatic preacher was an ideologically suitable—if not ideal—candidate to preach to the white, working class demographic that Bellevue

⁶⁸ *By His Grace and For His Glory: Celebrating a Centenary With Bellevue Baptist Church*, (Cordova, Tennessee: Bellevue Baptist Church, 2003), p. 22.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, p. 32

⁷⁰ Hankins, “White Flight, Shift to the Right”.

⁷¹ Robert G. Lee, quoted in *By His Grace*, p. 77.

⁷² *Ibid*, p. 67.

would rely upon to achieve its growth throughout his pastorate.⁷³ Before moving to Memphis in 1927, Lee had already achieved his lifelong ambition of becoming a 'big-city preacher'.⁷⁴ He was 'quite content' preaching at Citadel Square Baptist Church, a large congregation in Charleston, South Carolina, where he was 'building a reputation as one of the South's leading preachers'.⁷⁵ Thus, when Bellevue's Pulpit Committee offered Lee the vacant senior pastor position, his initial response was to decline. But Lee soon changed his mind: for a man of Lee's ambitions the appeal of preaching at Bellevue, which was located in an even bigger city and which had vast potential for growth, proved impossible to resist.

Much like the movement of conservative evangelicalism as a whole, growth and expansion would be the dominant themes of Lee's thirty-three-year pastorate. He attracted thousands of new members, expanded the church's facilities, and widened its range of activities. Perhaps the most telling indicator of Bellevue's growth during Lee's tenure is the church's membership figures. In 1927, Lee's first year at the church, Bellevue had a membership of 1,430. By 1960, the year of his retirement, that figure had risen to over nine thousand—a six-fold growth in the size of the congregation.⁷⁶ By that point Bellevue was 'the second-largest church of the Southern Baptist Convention'.⁷⁷ In order to keep up with the swelling numbers of people involved with the church, Bellevue also underwent an extensive building program. Prior to the all-new sanctuary being completed in 1952, Lee oversaw the enlargement of the church's original facility, which was completed in 1930 despite the ensuing economic devastation of the Great Depression. This was followed shortly afterwards by a new educational building. Later, once the original building had been replaced by the all-new sanctuary, Bellevue held onto the old facility and renamed it the Lee Building. The building program was so extensive that by the time Lee retired the church's facilities effectively 'span[ned] a [whole] city block'.⁷⁸

To what extent was Lee responsible for the Bellevue's exceptional growth? The degree of Lee's success at Bellevue was, of course, linked to the broader growth trends of conservative evangelicalism in the first half of the twentieth century. The Southern Baptist Convention's growth was particularly strong during this period, with the denomination accruing four

⁷³ This dissertation takes seriously the notion that a central reason for the growth of evangelical churches in the post-war era was because they appealed directly to politically and culturally conservative working and middle class whites. Conservative evangelical churches formed a refuge from the rapidly changing social and racial landscape of post-civil rights America, and were an environment where conservative ideologies were adapted and adjusted so that they were suitable for the era of "colourblindness". Through the method of an individual case study, this dissertation hopes to build on the work of a handful of other studies tackling the subject of the popularity of conservative evangelicalism. See Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776 – 2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005); see also the old but still highly relevant study by Dean M. Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing: A Study in Sociology of Religion*, (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1977).

handful of in-depth studies already exist which discuss the causes of conservative evangelicalism

⁷⁴ Hankins, "White Flight, Shift to the Right".

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ By *His Grace*, p. 67.

⁷⁷ "Great Churches of America: IV. Bellevue Baptist, Memphis", *The Christian Century*, April 19, 1950, p. 490, Buildings – Sanctuary (1952) folder, History – Articles folder, DMCF.

⁷⁸ By *His Grace*, p. 67.

million new members and over doubling in size between 1920 and 1950. In this respect, Lee was fortunate to have been a preacher at a SBC church in a large city during a period of very high growth for the denomination he was a part of. However, the rate at which Bellevue grew between 1930 and 1960 was roughly three times greater than that of the denomination as a whole. The above-average growth rate during that period suggests that Lee's success was also related to his credentials and skills as a pastor. This point is further supported by the membership figures of Bellevue during the pastorate of Lee's successor, Dr Ramsey Pollard, which actually dropped, even while the SBC continued to grow at a national level. As one commentator argued when asked by a Christian journal what the secret to Bellevue's success was: "It isn't a strategic location that makes a great church; it is a strategic pastor".⁷⁹ As the church's first high-profile pastor, Lee's arrival therefore represented something of a coup for Bellevue. One especially enthusiastic worshipper declared shortly after his arrival that Dr Lee was "the greatest preacher on earth".⁸⁰

Lee had acquired his decorated reputation largely thanks to success of his famous "Payday Someday" sermon, which he had been preaching ever since 1919. "Payday Someday" was based on the two Old Testament chapters *I Kings 21* and *II Kings 9*, and its central theme was the notion that all of mankind's sins would eventually be judged. But like all significant sermons, the source of its popularity lay in its combination of content and execution. Lee's prose in "Payday Someday" was eloquent and articulate, and although his style was less intense than some of his firebrand colleagues, the sermon was nonetheless absorbing in Lee's idiosyncratic manner. In terms of influence and popularity "Payday Someday" has been compared to British colonial theologian Jonathan Edwards' "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God". Meanwhile, historian of the SBC Barry Hankins has suggested that it was the 'southern equivalent' of Russell Conwell's "Acres of Diamonds".⁸¹ Lee preached "Payday Someday" 'more than 1,200 times' throughout his career, and his 'vivid characterisations' and charismatic delivery — 'Lee needed no script' to carry out the one-hour sermon — had made the preacher a household name by the time he arrived at Bellevue.⁸² While he was at the church Lee set aside the first Sunday of every May for an annual delivery of the sermon, 'until the crowds grew so large the event had to be moved to Ellis Auditorium where 9,000 could be seated'.⁸³ Bellevue's growth is also attributable to Lee's talent for fundraising. In 1934 Lee launched the church's "Love Offering" initiative which, despite the continued effects of the Great Depression in Memphis, raised \$36,000 in its first year — the equivalent to over \$600,000 today. The Love Offering fundraiser has been an annual occasion at the church ever since, and has been used to pay off church debts and fund missions and building programmes.

Although the amount of charitable donations the church received might suggest otherwise, the average Bellevue member during Lee's tenure was not wealthy. In fact, the

⁷⁹ Arthur Flake, quoted in Leona Lavender, "The Story of Bellevue Baptist Church, Memphis, Tennessee, Under the Ministry of Dr. R. G. Lee" in *The Sunday School Builder*, Vol. 12, No. 6, June 1932, p. 12, History – Articles folder, DMCF.

⁸⁰ Quote from "Great Churches of America", p. 490.

⁸¹ By His Grace; Hankins, "White Flight, Shift to the Right".

⁸² *By His Grace*, p. 70.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

socioeconomic makeup of the congregation in many ways resembled that of a typical mid-century urban Southern Baptist church: that is, Bellevue members were predominantly from working class backgrounds, were unlikely to be educated beyond high school, and often had low-wage service sector or blue-collar jobs. It would be an exaggeration to suggest that Bellevue's members experienced the poverty that their coreligionists from more rural areas of the Cotton Belt did during the Great Depression, but neither would it be accurate to describe the congregation as prosperous or even middle class. As one *Christian Century* church profile put it in 1950, 'Among the many citizens of Memphis, not many great and not many mighty are members of the Bellevue Baptist Church...Other churches enrol most of the prominent figures of this midsouth city of 350,000, but Bellevue Baptist carries on its rolls...the common people'.⁸⁴ Although thousands of other SBC congregations in the South would comfortably fit this description, Bellevue's socioeconomic profile during the Lee pastorate was also a symptom the church's unique local context. In the late 1920s and 1930s Memphis had yet to fully recover from the mass withdrawal of middle class whites who had left the city in the wake of the yellow fever epidemics of the late nineteenth century—a situation which was accentuated by the Great Depression. The fact that Bellevue was not a wealthy congregation during the Lee pastorate highlights the famous pastor's exceptional skill for convincing his congregation of the importance of investing in their church. More importantly, it also emphasises the transformation in the socioeconomic profile of the church that had begun to take place during the 1970s, as discussed in the next chapter.

In terms of membership growth and building expansion the last fifteen years of Lee's tenure were his most successful, and they corresponded to a period of dramatic growth for evangelicalism as a whole. The first fifteen years after World War II were indeed boom years for white evangelical congregations in southern states such as Mississippi and Tennessee. Millions of 'returning service personnel' and new believers flocked to churches as 'scores of congregations...set new attendance records'.⁸⁵ But America's post-war religious resurgence did not extend to all Protestant denominations. In fact, while the membership rates of mainline denominations such as the United Methodist Church and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) actually declined, it was the membership of evangelical institutions such as the Southern Baptist Convention that benefitted the most from the nation's renewed religious vigour. Between 1946 and 1956, membership of the SBC alone grew from six million to 8.7 million. Significantly, the post-war growth of the SBC even transcended the denomination's traditional regional boundaries. For the first time in its history, the SBC began to have a presence in Midwestern states such as Indiana, Illinois, and Michigan, and in the Pacific States of California, Washington and Oregon.⁸⁶ In 1940, SBC-affiliated congregations could be found in nineteen states, most of which were in the South. But by 1957, the SBC had attained a truly nationwide presence, with congregations in all but seven states. As denominations like the SBC testify, evangelicalism started the post-war era stronger than ever, converting record numbers of believers and spreading the Gospel to the farthest corners of the nation. Indeed,

⁸⁴ "Great Churches of America", p. 490.

⁸⁵ Dupont, *Mississippi Praying*, p. 39.

⁸⁶ Ibid, p. 42. For a study of evangelical culture outside of its heartland of the South, see Mark A. Shibley, *Resurgent Evangelicalism in the United States: Mapping Culture Change Since 1970*, (Columbia, SC: The University of South Carolina Press, 1996).

by the middle of the 1950s, evangelicalism had become one of the largest religious groups in the United States.⁸⁷

Bellevue, like many other Baptist congregations in Memphis, benefitted from this nationwide surge in evangelical religiosity. But just as it had done during the Great Depression, the church also managed to grow at a quicker rate than its rival congregations. A comparison between the membership figures of Bellevue and its main city rival, First Baptist, between 1940 and 1950, reveals both the scale of evangelical growth in Memphis and the extent to which Bellevue had begun to consolidate its position as the city's largest and most prominent white Baptist congregation. Between 1940 and 1950, the membership of First Baptist, which was also a member of the Southern Baptist Convention, grew from 2,448 to 3,553, an average yearly increase of one hundred people.⁸⁸ Meanwhile, Bellevue began the 1940s with a membership of 5,362 and ended it with 8,272 members—meaning the church grew by an average of three hundred members per year.⁸⁹ Bellevue's rate of membership growth was thus three times higher than that of First Baptist's, but the figures for the years between 1940 and 1950 also demonstrate that Bellevue's growth was *proportionally* higher than First's: whereas First Baptist's congregation grew by an impressive forty percent in the space of ten years, Bellevue's congregation grew by an even more impressive fifty-four percent. These figures demonstrate that even during the post-war evangelical revival—when one would expect nearby churches to begin to catch up—the rate of Bellevue's enlargement comfortably exceeded that of its rival congregations.

As the above figures hint at, the first fifteen years after the War were when Bellevue consolidated its position as the city and even the region's most prominent white Southern Baptist congregation. In the South, this kind of status was usually reserved for a city's "first" Baptist congregation, such as First Baptist, Atlanta, and First Baptist, Dallas, the largest evangelical churches in their respective cities. Bellevue's exceptional growth during the 1940s—caused by its post-war building programme, its staunch theological conservatism, and the status and charisma of its pastor—enabled the church to subvert this tradition. As an indication of Bellevue's presence in the city, few things could have matched the church's new sanctuary. One year before the building was completed, First Baptist had finished a new sanctuary of its own. But First's facility was dwarfed by Bellevue's, which was one of the largest of its kind in the whole of the South. The completion in 1952 of Bellevue's new sanctuary thus literally cemented the church's position as Memphis' leading Baptist congregation. The prestige of eclipsing First Baptist as the city's statistically and physically largest evangelical congregation was further compounded by the success Lee was having, not just as pastor of Bellevue, but also at a denominational level. In 1949, Lee began his first of three consecutive terms as President of the Southern Baptist Convention, the most prestigious Baptist post in the country. As a result of the growth and prestige Bellevue had achieved after the War, the church was beginning to attain nationwide recognition. In a poll conducted in 1950 of 100,000 ministers, Bellevue was chosen as 'the church most worthy of study in a large

⁸⁷ The most comprehensive overview of the growth trends of Protestant denominations during the twentieth century is Finke and Stark's *The Churching of America*.

⁸⁸ *Shelby County Baptist Association*, "Annual Sessions, 1940 Minutes" and "Annual Sessions, 1950 Minutes", DMCF.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

city in the southeast quarter of the country', and even as 'one of the great churches of America'.⁹⁰ The survey pointed to Bellevue's outstanding congregational growth, the popularity and denominational success of Pastor Lee, and the success of the church's charity endeavours as the key reasons for its success.

"Setting the City on Fire": The Arrival of Ramsey Pollard

On December 3, 1959, Robert Lee announced his retirement from the pastorate he had held for thirty-two years. The decision would take effect the following February, when Lee's successor, Dr Ramsey Pollard, would take over as senior pastor. Lee's last major contribution to the church was to help launch the United States' first evangelical television ministry, set up in 1958 using cameras and a 'television broadcast station' which the church had purchased itself.⁹¹ The ministry aired Sunday sermons from Bellevue's pulpit directly to thousands of homes in several states across the South. Bellevue would expand its television ministry continuously over the ensuing decades, and the innovation inspired countless other large churches to establish television ministries of their own. Lee's pioneering new ministry cemented his legacy as one of Bellevue's "great preachers", and bookended the pastor's long succession of impressive pastoral achievements. Other notable accomplishments of Lee's thirty-two year pastorate included gaining a grand total of 23,000 new members, increasing the total value of the church's property to 'over three million dollars,' and receiving a total of \$8.4m worth of charitable gift receipts.⁹² In other words, Lee was largely responsible for transforming Bellevue from a mid-sized, Depression-era congregation into an early example of a "megachurch", with one of the largest and fastest growing audiences in the South, and an entrepreneurial ethos which sought innovative new ways of spreading the Gospel.

Pollard's pastorate, which lasted from 1960 to 1972, did not run nearly as smoothly as his predecessor's. To begin with, whereas Bellevue had spent the 1950s riding on the wave of extraordinary post-war evangelical growth and prosperity—apparently oblivious to the burgeoning racial unrest that was taking place in the SBC and in southern cities like Memphis—the sixties would be the decade in which the church would finally come into direct contact with the surrounding turbulence of America's social upheavals (as discussed in the next section of this chapter). But what shook the congregational culture of Bellevue to its foundations was not its contact with the civil rights movement, but rather a controversy related to the suitability of Pollard for being Lee's successor. Early on in Pollard's tenure the church struggled to adjust to the shock of welcoming in its first new pastor in over three decades. The disorientation caused by Pollard's noticeably different pastoral style was the source of an internal rift which resulted in numerous members leaving the church. The impact that these issues had on the health of the church is disputable, and it is of course important not to overemphasise their significance. Barry Hankins has appeared to downplay the negative impact that the Pollard years on had on the church, referring to Pollard's pastorate

⁹⁰ "The Great Churches of America", *The Christian Century*, p. 490.

⁹¹ "50 Golden Years of Gospel Ministry", church pamphlet, Robert G. Lee folder, DMCF.

⁹² Billy Swift, "Carolina Plowboy R. G. Lee Climbed to Pulpit Prestige", *The Commercial Appeal*, November 12, 1960, Robert G. Lee folder, DMCF.

as '[f]or the most part... a twelve year holding pattern'.⁹³ However, there are few better indicators of a church's health than the rate at which it is growing, and in contrast to many of its regional rivals Bellevue's membership actually decreased between 1960 and 1972.

Based on Pollard's credentials, however, few could have anticipated the difficulties the church would encounter during the 1960s. To begin with, Pollard was a self-described fundamentalist and biblical inerrantist, which meant he shared an identical theological outlook to Dr Lee and the church's laypeople. Pollard's résumé also seemed to suggest that he was the ideal man to succeed Lee. In his first year at Bellevue Pollard served his term as president of the SBC, the most prestigious honour in Southern Baptist denominational life, and a clear indication that he was up to the task of preaching at a megachurch. His pastoral background was similarly impressive. Pollard was born in Cleburne, Texas, in 1903, (the same year Bellevue was founded), and preached at two Baptist churches in his home state before becoming senior pastor at Broadway Baptist Church in Knoxville, Tennessee, where he stayed for twenty-one years. It was at Broadway Baptist that Pollard built his reputation as a talented pastor, and it was also where he 'had planned to retire'.⁹⁴ But 'the lure' of preaching at one of the country's largest Southern Baptist congregations—and also, perhaps, the notion of succeeding pastor Lee—'was simply too much...so Pollard made his late career move' in 1960.⁹⁵

Unsurprisingly for a skilled orator and regular public speaker, Pollard was not inclined to shy away from the attention brought about by becoming the new pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church. Indeed, in some respects he appeared to actually revel in it. He liked to 'say that when he came to Memphis as pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church, he set the city on fire'.⁹⁶ Here Pollard was referring to the weekend of his very first Sunday service at Bellevue, when a huge fire 'burnt to the ground' the adjacent Russwood Baseball Stadium, and 'threatened Baptist Memorial Hospital a few blocks from the church'.⁹⁷ Controversy seemed to plague Pollard's pastorate from the very beginning, and soon he began to attract attention for the wrong reasons. The first problem was to do with the house Bellevue was considering to provide for Pollard and his family upon their arrival in Memphis, which 'some felt' cost far too much.⁹⁸ But this relatively minor issue paled in comparison to the discord experienced just a year and a half into Pollard's tenure, when the Bellevue preacher caused a church split over the issue of his pastoring style. A sizable group of dissenters within the congregation had grown increasingly dissatisfied with Pollard, and quickly 'put before the deacons a resolution to have Pollard removed'.⁹⁹ Quite remarkably, the resolution culminated in an open vote to determine whether or not Pollard would remain as Bellevue's pastor. The sources of dissatisfaction were, according to a Bellevue member who wrote a dissertation about the pastoral history of the church, that Pollard 'had failed in his pastoral duties; he had failed to

⁹³ Hankins, "White Flight, Shift to the Right", p. 4.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ *By His Grace*, p. 81.

⁹⁷ Hankins, "White Flight, Shift to the Right", p. 4.

⁹⁸ Dan Lester Greer, "Bellevue Baptist Church as an Example of the Megachurch Model in Church Growth," (D. Min. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1995), p. 82.

⁹⁹ Hankins, "White Flight, Shift to the Right", p. 4.

lead the church spiritually; and his sermons were inadequate'.¹⁰⁰ Other charges included that Pollard was not 'able to communicate with small children' and that his cigar smoking was inappropriate.¹⁰¹ On December 17, 1961, at a meeting of 'roughly 2,500 in attendance,' the congregation voted 1,180 to 808 in favour of keeping Pollard, with the remaining voters abstaining.

Although the outcome of the vote gave Pollard a mandate to continue his duties at Bellevue, 'he was now the pastor of a church where almost 40 percent of the people did not approve of him'.¹⁰² A sizable proportion of those who favoured firing Pollard broke away from the church, many of whom went on to establish Second Baptist Church, Memphis, a congregation which still exists today. According to Pollard, the "core of the opposition [then] left that church and started an independent fundamentalist church" called Emmanuel.¹⁰³ Despite these drastic measures, in an interview conducted in 1975 Pollard played down the significance of the church split, referring to it as "one little unpleasant experience".¹⁰⁴ He claimed the church had predominantly stayed loyal to him, and that many of those that left had eventually come back to Bellevue. In the same interview Pollard implied that the split was in some part caused by the dissenters' belief that he was "not evangelistic" enough—even though, he argued, he had "been known as an evangelist [in] all of [his] ministry".¹⁰⁵ Pollard also admitted that the split could have been related to the shadow cast by pastor Lee: "I think that every preacher who follows a great preacher...like Robert Greene Lee, is going to have difficulties and problems...Usually there has to be one man to go in there and serve between that outstanding personality, and the next man has to be a man to come in there and solidify the situation and let it calm down and settle down a bit".¹⁰⁶

This is a view shared by Bill and Emily Cochran, two long term members of Bellevue. In an interview with the author, Mr and Mrs Cochran defended Pollard's role in the church split. They maintained that Pollard was a "great pastor", and believed "succeeding Dr Lee was always going to be difficult". Having been at the church since 1957, Mrs Cochran has memories of both the Lee and Pollard pastorates (whereas her husband joined later, in the 1960s).¹⁰⁷ She saw the split occurring because of the considerable differences between Lee and Pollard in terms of their preaching styles. Lee's "command of the English language was incredible", and his charisma and unique talent for delivering sermons was one of the reasons why "people from all over" came to see him preach.¹⁰⁸ Though Pollard was also a highly competent orator, the delivery of his sermons was noticeably less formal than Lee's. The official pastoral history of Bellevue, funded and published by the church itself in 2003 to commemorate its centenary, acknowledged that 'following the legendary Robert G. Lee was a formidable prospect', and that Pollard was noticeably more 'straightforward and humble

¹⁰⁰ Greer, "Bellevue Baptist Church", p. 83.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ramsey Pollard, Interview with Lynn E. May, 1975. Historical Commission, Southern Baptist Convention, Oral History Program. Southern Baptist Presidents, p. 14.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, p. 13.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, p. 14.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, p. 14 – 15.

¹⁰⁷ Bill and Emily Cochran, telephone interview with author, February 24, 2015.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

[than Lee, and he]...didn't pretend to be otherwise'.¹⁰⁹ Pollard's less formal style, the Cochrans conceded, "probably took some getting used to for some", and is likely to have been one of the reasons why some members got offended, especially given how long Lee had been at the church. Nonetheless, the Cochrans maintained that Pollard was devoted pastor who was good at his job.¹¹⁰

Despite Pollard's efforts to play down its significance, as well as some sympathetic views from Bellevue members, there is no doubt that the church split left a profound mark on the church for a long period of time. Bellevue member Dan Lester Greer described the split as a 'traumatic experience' which 'for many years' left 'the spirit of the church...broken'.¹¹¹ Perhaps the most reliable way to evaluate Bellevue's health during the period in question is to rely, once again, on membership figures.¹¹² In this case they offer an insight into the extent of Bellevue's post-Lee decline. In 1960 Bellevue's membership stood at 9,480, but in 1970 that figure had dropped to 8,679, representing a net loss of around nine percent of the congregation.¹¹³ This is a particularly eye-opening statistic given the rate at which southern white evangelicalism was growing during that decade, and the extent to which Bellevue itself had been growing up until 1960. Pollard's pastorate is anomalous to the contemporary history of the church in that it remains the only post-war tenure for which the membership figure was higher at the beginning than it was at the end; the other two of Bellevue's post-war pastors (excluding the church's incumbent pastor, Dr Steve Gains) achieved dramatic net growth in membership over the course of their terms. Other reasons exist for Bellevue's net loss of members over the course of the Pollard pastorate, such the church's failure to attract younger worshippers. However, the church split, combined with Pollard's general lack of popularity, are undoubtedly main reasons for Bellevue's deterioration during the 1960s. As asserted by Greer in his pastoral history of the church, it is clear that Bellevue did not fully recover from the split until the arrival of Pollard's hugely popular successor, Dr Adrian Rogers.¹¹⁴

A "Laissez-Faire" Approach Towards Racial Integration: Pollard's SBC Presidency, Bellevue and the Civil Rights Movement in Memphis

Further compounding the hapless beginning to Pollard's tenure, the church split corresponded to a period when Bellevue would become directly, albeit unintentionally, involved with the issues of racial segregation. In 1960, the year Pollard arrived at Bellevue,

¹⁰⁹ *By His Grace*, p. 82.

¹¹⁰ Bill and Emily Cochran, interview by the author.

¹¹¹ Greer, "Bellevue Baptist Church", p. 84.

¹¹² As argued by Dean Kelley, 'membership statistics are not the only index of social strength, yet they do point to a certain inescapable, irreducible, quantifiable "thereness" in an organization, which has some direct and discernible relation to its existence and success. That is, organizations are made up of members. Whatever its optimum size, an organization that is losing this essential substance is in a distinctly different state from one that is gaining it'. Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*, p. 16.

¹¹³ *Shelby County Baptist Association*, "Annual Sessions, 1960 Minutes" and "Annual Sessions, 1970 Minutes", DMCF.

¹¹⁴ Greer, "Bellevue Baptist Church", p. 11.

the civil rights movement in Memphis and beyond was gaining momentum. Recent federal desegregation rulings had given activists further confidence to resist racial discrimination in a broad range of segregated public spaces. Shortly after the lunch counter sit-ins started spreading across the region, churches soon became arenas of civil rights protest in the South. In August of that year, the “kneel-in” movement, with its racially mixed participants attempting to peacefully enter and worship at all-white congregations, arrived in Memphis. The remainder of this chapter is devoted to understanding the nature, implications, and effects of Bellevue’s relationship with desegregation initiatives such as kneel-in campaigns and the broader civil rights movement. After an overview of the denominational context—i.e., the ways in which the Southern Baptist Convention reacted to the apparent collapse of the Jim Crow caste system—the following paragraphs will evaluate Bellevue’s own position towards racial integration. It is demonstrated that at a time when large white churches were subjected to an unprecedented degree of public scrutiny with regards to their segregation policies, Bellevue positioned itself on the ideological centre of existing discourses on race. In practice, this meant the church did its best to tolerate the presence of American Americans in its pews, but unlike some of its more liberal coreligionists it did not go any further than that. Meanwhile, although Pollard publically declared that there was no Biblical or ethical justification for segregation, there was at the same time an obvious, albeit rarely mentioned, assumption at the church that blacks and whites “belonged” in different churches. In other words, Bellevue practiced a “laissez-faire” approach towards racial integration in that it did not progressively intervene in Memphis’s “race problem”, but neither did it actively resist desegregation. As the forces of the civil rights movement drove blatant racism further away from the cultural mainstream, this approach towards integration would become increasingly common in white evangelical churches. And as subsequent chapter demonstrate, it helped facilitate Bellevue’s links with white flight and in also the creation of a new conservative political culture at the church.

By the time the kneel-in movement had reached Memphis, the denomination that Bellevue belonged to was in the midst of an internal rift over the biblical justifications for segregation and racial inequality. The recent Supreme Court ruling declaring the unconstitutionality of segregation in public schools had triggered intense debates about the moral and theological justifications for racial segregation in America’s churches. By the beginning of the 1960s, as anti-segregation activists were stepping up their campaign and civil unrest in the South intensified, it was no longer possible for religious institutions to avoid the issue of integration. Moreover, recent developments had also inspired a vocal minority of southern evangelicals on the left of their movement to begin to apply the principle of desegregation to their religious organisations. The presence of racially liberal Protestants infuriated the majority of southern white evangelicals, who were still heavily invested in the institution of segregation. The new discussions about race and the uncertainties over the future of segregation were particularly controversial for the Southern Baptist Convention, and for the thousands of churches under its denominational umbrella. This was in large part a legacy of the important role that white supremacy had played in the Convention’s formation. Throughout much of the nineteenth century Baptists in the South rigorously defended their biblical defence of slavery, while their northern coreligionists grew increasingly abolitionist. The SBC was formed in 1845 when a group of southern Baptists split from the Triennial

Convention—the United States’ first Baptist denomination—after it refused to consider ordaining a slaveholder as a missionary. In turn, the SBC held onto its ‘white religious traditions,’ which ‘continued to foster its strong sense of distinctiveness well into the twentieth century’.¹¹⁵ Two of these racial traditions which continued into the Jim Crow era were the ideal of white supremacy and the practice of segregation. The SBC, ‘like most southern institutions, reflected, manifested, and in many instances led the racism of the region as a whole’.¹¹⁶ The assumption that ‘segregation was [a] natural’ and God-intended principle dominated southern white evangelical discourse up to and including the civil rights movement.¹¹⁷

Although the SBC had always been dominated by theological conservatives—the majority of whom were, up until the end of the 1960s, openly racially conservative—there had also always existed a small group of liberals within the denomination who used the opportunity of the civil rights movement to speak out against black oppression and to argue that segregation was unchristian. Many of the Baptist liberals had elite positions in the SBC’s institutional hierarchy or belonged to the denomination’s seminaries. This enabled liberals to act with a degree of influence that was disproportional to their numerical size. It was thanks in part to their disproportional power that SBC liberals had managed to persuade the SBC, during its annual convention meeting in 1954, to officially endorse the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court ruling. But the 1954 convention meeting was far from being an accurate indication of the general attitudes of Southern Baptists towards desegregation’.¹¹⁸ In fact, up until the end of the civil rights movement, once the cultural mainstream of southern society no longer accepted racism as a norm, the majority of Southern Baptists vigorously defended their segregation practices. The battle against integration took place on numerous different fronts, including theology. Many Baptists in the South insisted that the current social order was in line with God’s intentions, and that proof of this could be found in the Bible. Indeed, the ‘biblical case for segregation enjoyed a renaissance after the *Brown* decision,’ because segregationists were sensitive to the threat posed to segregation from within their own religion.¹¹⁹

Thus, although they had existed in the denomination for decades, it was only during the civil rights movement that the presence of SBC progressives and liberals had become unbearable for conservatives. For decades prior to the civil rights movement, moderates, liberals and conservatives of the SBC had coexisted relatively peacefully. But as soon as they began to step up their attempts to redeem America’s racial immoralities, progressives became an intolerable presence for Southern Baptist conservatives. The outrage felt by conservatives over their coreligionists’ racial progressivism was even the genesis of an ensuing battle—known as the Conservative Resurgence or the Southern Baptist Holy War—to rid the SBC of its moderate and progressive impulses entirely.¹²⁰ During the 1960s, the battle intricately

¹¹⁵ Dupont, *Mississippi Praying*, p. 41.

¹¹⁶ Hankins, *Uneasy in Babylon*, p. 242.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Hankins, *Uneasy in Babylon*, p. 242.

¹¹⁹ Dupont, *Mississippi Praying*, p. 79.

¹²⁰ The field of work done on the SBC’s Conservative Resurgence is too vast to list here, but for studies which forefront the conflict’s racial dimension, see Dupont, *Mississippi Praying*, pp. 201 – 213; Ellen M.

linked theological differences between the two camps with their respective attitudes towards race and segregation. That is, their policies toward segregation were intimately tied to, and in many ways symptomatic, of their theological outlooks. On one side, progressives were heavily influenced by social gospel, which saw inequality as the product of societal failure, and in turn promoted Christian intervention to social problems. The liberalism of Baptist progressives was also reflected in how they “read” the Bible: progressives argued that much of the Bible should be interpreted in an allegorical, non-literal manner. Conversely, conservatives leant on a theological framework ‘that construed morality in entirely individualistic terms and rendered the structures of inequality invisible’.¹²¹ This enabled prominent conservative pastors like Douglas Hudgins of First Baptist, Jackson, Mississippi, to ‘argue that the Christian faith had nothing to do with a corporate, societal problem like segregation’.¹²² Meanwhile, in contrast to the progressives, conservative Baptists were biblical inerrantists in that they believed in the literal truth of Scripture. Although many Baptists conservatives were, throughout the civil rights movement, at least as outraged by progressives’ racial stances as they were their liberal interpretations of the Bible, the Conservative Resurgence ‘placed theology at the centre of the struggle’.¹²³ This enabled conservatives to battle against both racial progressivism and biblical liberalism—and in turn maintain their dedication to white supremacy—by rarely, if ever, mentioning segregation or race.

One of the most challenging tasks for a SBC president during the 1960s was to act as mediator between the increasingly polarised sides of the segregationist divide. The issue of integration—never far away from the minds of conservative Baptists—meant the stakes were raised for SBC presidents during the numerous civil rights controversies of the fifties and sixties. Thus, post-*Brown*, each president’s pastoral background, theological credentials, and stances on segregation were scrutinised to an unprecedented degree. Dr Pollard’s own SBC presidency, which took place from 1960 to 1961, went some way towards appeasing the angry conservatives of his denomination. The decision to nominate Pollard as president was, in terms of maintaining a degree of order amidst the storm of controversy that had enveloped the SBC ever since the dawning of the civil rights movement, in many ways a savvy choice. To begin with, Pollard’s refusal to get involved with racial matters or politics during his presidency gave him an air of neutrality which his predecessor, Brooks Hays, lacked. Hays, who was the Democrat Congressman for Arkansas during his two consecutive presidential terms between 1958 and 1960, infuriated conservatives because of the way he had dealt with a sensitive integration issue during his time as a Congressman. In 1957 Hays, who had no experience as a pastor, found himself caught in the crossfire of the infamous Little Rock Crisis, which took place when nine black students attempted to attend a white high school in Arkansas. The decision by the segregationist Governor Orval Faubus to call up the National Guard to prevent the students attending required a federal intervention headed by president Eisenhower. Hays angered a vocal minority of Baptist conservatives after he refused to

Rosenberg, *The Southern Baptists: A Subculture in Transition*, (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1989).

¹²¹ Dupont, *Mississippi Praying*, p. 106.

¹²² Hankins, *Uneasy in Babylon*, p. 242.

¹²³ Dupont, *Mississippi Praying*, p. 202.

support Faubus's drastic measures in the state capital. To SBC segregationists, Hays' 'mediating role' in the crisis represented 'a symbol of a dangerous trend in religious life'.¹²⁴ Baptist conservatives pointed to Hays' status as a former chairman of the liberal-leaning Christian Life Commission, as well as his handling of the Little Rock Crisis, as evidence that the denomination was being infiltrated by a leftist insurgency determined to undermine segregation.¹²⁵

It is unlikely to have been accidental that a pastor like Dr Pollard was chosen to succeed Hays as president of the SBC. Rather than risk causing further conflict and instability by nominating another inexperienced, relatively liberal candidate, the denomination instead opted for a conservative, experienced pastor who knew Southern Baptist mores well. Indeed, Pollard himself claimed he made a good SBC president because he "knew Baptist people; I knew what they wanted to do, and I helped them do it".¹²⁶ Although Pollard never sided with conservatives on the integration issue, his unapologetic biblical inerrantism left no question mark over which side of the theological divide he belonged to. In his own words, he considered himself "one of those fundamentalist fellows", which would have pleased the majority of the Convention's churches and members.¹²⁷ Pollard's background and theological credentials went some way towards appeasing Baptist conservatives in the wake of Hays' controversial terms. Aside from one occasion when "something came up" (which he never elaborated on), Pollard recalled his two terms as SBC president as running smoothly.¹²⁸ Possibly alluding to the controversy that plagued his predecessor's reign, he claimed he could not "recall any question that came up that was anywhere near causing a division in the Convention" during his presidency.¹²⁹ Pollard claimed to have had the support from the "overwhelming majority of preachers, laymen, and women" of the Convention. Moreover, aside from opposing the election of President John F. Kennedy on "religious grounds", Pollard rarely spoke publically about politically sensitive issues.¹³⁰ Having been raised by an alcoholic father, he was more concerned with his personal crusade against the liquor industry than he was with addressing the "race problem" in America.¹³¹

Another way in which Pollard sided himself with conservatives during this critical period of SBC history was his outspoken criticisms of the denomination's liberal voices. He unleashed his harshest criticisms at the seminaries, where many of the SBC's most liberal figures resided. In a direct and unambiguous attack, Pollard argued in one of his presidential messages that "The seminary professor who didn't believe in the great fundamental truths of God's Word should be terminated before the setting of the sun". He continued, "We ought not to pay a man a salary to destroy the faith of our young preachers".¹³² Pollard expressed an equal amount of resentment towards the Convention's notoriously liberal Christian Life Commission, the now-defunct body responsible for the SBC's public policy, and the

¹²⁴ Ibid, p. 111.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Pollard, interview with May, p. 23.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid, p. 36.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid, p. 39.

¹³¹ Ibid, p. 16.

¹³² Ibid, p. 41.

organisation which helped push through SBC's official endorsement of *Brown* in 1954. He believed that the Commission was "bringing it on itself" in the wake of the widespread criticism it routinely received, and that it "ought to be more cautious in irritating the great mass of our people".¹³³ In 1970, Pollard was involved in a dispute over the future of the CLC after it received complaints about its "exceedingly unwise" programming.¹³⁴ The executive chairman of the CLC assured Pollard that the mistake would not happen again and, fearing a deepening rift within the Convention over the issue, the Bellevue pastor voted in favour of maintaining the Commission's funding. Pollard would later look upon his decisive role in saving the CLC as the "biggest mistake I have ever made in my denominational life".¹³⁵

Overall, Pollard's SBC presidency helped mollify some of the unrest that had taken place at the SBC in the wake of Hays' controversial terms. His inerrantist credentials and outspoken criticism of the SBC's liberal impulses placed the Bellevue pastor firmly on the conservative side of the denomination's increasingly polarised theological rift, even though he never sided with conservatives on the segregation issue. Any individual Southern Baptist's attitude towards the CLC was, particularly during the civil right era, an accurate indication of their theological orientation and their approach towards social ministry. Progressive Baptists approved of the Commission because they believed that addressing social inequalities was at least as important as "winning souls" though evangelising individuals. Meanwhile, conservatives saw the CLC's more liberal ethos as a threat to what they believed to be the SBC's crucial emphasis on biblical inerrancy and individual soul winning. For Pollard, the key to a successful church like Bellevue was a pastor who put a strong emphasis on evangelism, as opposed to social ministry. Although, Pollard argued, there was an "element of interdependence" between evangelism and a social focus, the main reason for Bellevue's success was its strong "spirit of evangelism".¹³⁶ Pollard believed the chief "thing we should be magnifying above everything else is the spirit of evangelicalism, winning people to Christ".¹³⁷ Meanwhile, as a denominational politician Pollard shrewdly avoided doing or saying anything that would make him appear to endorse either side of debate over race and segregation. This made sense in terms of fulfilling his duty of sustaining relative calm within the denomination. But it would not be long before Pollard would be forced—as a pastor rather than a denominational politician—to construct a stance towards segregation of his own.

Shortly after the Freedom Riders attempted integrated public travel and campaigners organised sit-ins at whites-only diners, civil rights protest in the South soon spread to segregated churches. These "kneel-ins" would become 'an integral part of the larger campaign...of direct action that was sweeping the South' from the beginning of the 1960s.¹³⁸ Although more limited in scope, 'number of participants, and degree of social disruption' than their secular counterparts, kneel-ins had the advantage of possessing a unique moral

¹³³ Ibid, p. 42.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid, p. 43.

¹³⁶ Ibid, p. 15.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Stephen R. Haynes, *The Last Segregated Hour: The Memphis Kneel-Ins and the Campaign for Southern Church Desegregation*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 11. Original emphasis.

dimension.¹³⁹ By using churches as sites of protest, campaigners fore-fronted the ethical implications of racial discrimination: kneel-ins—unlike other forms of protest, which tackled the issues such as property rights and freedom of association—were thus ‘moral spectacles *par excellence*’.¹⁴⁰ A kneel-in typically involved black or racially mixed groups attempting to peacefully enter a segregated church to worship. The visit was then categorised as either a “spectacle of embrace” or a “spectacle of exclusion”, depending on the church’s response to the campaigners.¹⁴¹ The first documented kneel-in took place in August 1960 in Atlanta, Georgia, and within months the movement had spread to cities all over the South. By April 1961, as many as two hundred churches across the nation had been targeted.¹⁴²

Memphis was one of the first cities after Atlanta to be subjected to kneel-ins. On Sunday, August 21, 1960, a small group of black students attempted, in this case successfully, to worship ‘at two Catholic churches’ in the city.¹⁴³ One week later, it was already Bellevue’s turn. As one of the largest white churches in Memphis, it was almost inevitable Bellevue was targeted. As noted by Stephen Haynes in his study of the kneel-in movement, ‘the more prominent and centrally located the congregation, the more powerful the spectacle. This is undoubtedly why churches in the town square or city center, or churches that were “first” in their respective denominations, were the most common targets’.¹⁴⁴ Dr Pollard appeared acutely aware that Bellevue’s prominence—as well as his own status as president of the SBC—made his church particularly susceptible to attention from the kneel-in movement: “I knew that since I was coming here [to Bellevue] and, since I was president of the Southern Baptist Convention, that in all likelihood they [the protestors] would bring in outside forces and try to force the issue here,” Pollard later recalled.¹⁴⁵ Bearing in mind the context of racial tension in 1960s Memphis, as well as the intensity of the debates surrounding segregation in the SBC, the way in which Bellevue Baptist Church—in Pollard’s words, “one of the great churches of our Convention”—responded to the kneel-ins was highly significant.¹⁴⁶ Once the kneelers came knocking would the church create a spectacle of embrace or a spectacle of exclusion? Pollard claimed that while he was pastor Bellevue had always welcomed African Americans, and that he saw no biblical reason to resist church integration. He recalled bringing his deacons together at the beginning of his pastorate and telling them, “we are going to be put to the test”, and that “the thing for you to do, the biblical thing for you to do, is that if these Negroes want to come to this church, let them come. Make no issue of it, let them be seen where they want to be seen...Don’t say anything that would hurt their feelings. Just treat them like you treat everybody else”.¹⁴⁷ He claimed to have told the church that “there is no ground

¹³⁹ Ibid, p. 14.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 15. Original emphasis.

¹⁴¹ Ibid, p. 15. Haynes’ terms “spectacles of embrace” and “spectacles of exclusion” have been adapted from Miroslav Wolf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, (Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 1996).

¹⁴² Haynes, *The Last Segregated Hour*, p. 21.

¹⁴³ Ibid, p. 26.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 15.

¹⁴⁵ Pollard, interview with May, p. 34.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

for excluding black people from your church...You can do it on prejudice, you can do it on earthly reasoning; but so far as the Bible is concerned, you can't".¹⁴⁸

For a large congregation with such strong denominational ties, it is in some ways unsurprising that Bellevue adopted a moderate stance towards race and integration. Once desegregation initiatives and the nationwide expansion of evangelicalism had begun to provoke debates about the theological legitimacy of the racial caste system, it was the smaller congregations in less urban settings and with relatively weak denominational connections which were the most likely to defend segregation most rigorously.¹⁴⁹ Larger congregations in more urbanised settings were, on the other hand, more likely to be racially moderate. Accordingly, there is little evidence to suggest that there was any kind of active resistance to African Americans entering the church from the Bellevue's membership. Exceptions to this usually took the shape of isolated incidents of individual confrontation, such as when a man that Pollard knew "got mad and left the church because we had them [African Americans] in" the congregation.¹⁵⁰ But despite acknowledging the lack of a biblical mandate for segregation, Bellevue never went as far as the Christian Life Commission in publically speaking out against America's "race problem", nor did it attempt to address Memphis's racial inequalities in any meaningful or direct way. Instead, the church's approach towards desegregation is best described as *laissez-faire*. Indeed, its practices resembled that of the city of Memphis itself, which was extremely slow to implement *Brown* and spent most of the 1960s deferring integration or offering "token desegregation".¹⁵¹ The manner in which Bellevue dealt with being targeted by the civil rights initiatives during the height of the kneel-in campaign demonstrates the church's overall willingness to actually be, as well as be seen as, racially moderate. Unlike other large, white churches in Memphis—such as Second Presbyterian Church, which was thrust into a deep crisis as a result of the kneel-ins—the congregation was not split over the issue.¹⁵² At the same time, Bellevue's responses to the kneel-ins also hint at the limitations of the church's racial consciousness, its lack of any willingness to actively address racial inequality, and its *laissez-faire* approach towards integration.

Evidence suggests that there were at least two separate instances of kneel-in protests at Bellevue during the sixties. During the first, which took place the Sunday after the movement arrived in Memphis, on August 28, an unsavoury incident occurred which featured in a local newspaper a few days later. In accordance with Pollard's wish, the activists, who were young African American students, were allowed entry into the church. However, the church did not quite manage to treat the students in the same way as everyone else, as requested by Pollard, nor did it "let them be seen where they want[ed] to be seen". Once the protesters entered the church they were offered seating in a separate, i.e. segregated, section of the sanctuary, 'on the third floor balcony'.¹⁵³ This was likely to have been because there was simply not enough space to seat them with the main audience, although it could also have been because the ushers deemed it more suitable for them to sit away from the white members

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Dupont, *Mississippi Praying*, p. 81.

¹⁵⁰ Pollard, interview with May, p. 35.

¹⁵¹ Kiel, "Exploded Dreams", p. 263.

¹⁵² Second Presbyterian is Haynes' main case study in his monograph, *The Last Segregated Hour*.

¹⁵³ Ibid, p. 26.

of the congregation. Either way, the students declined the offer and “left peacefully”, but not before ‘arguing with ushers in the church vestibule’.¹⁵⁴ The confrontation caused around fifty members to leave the sanctuary, although according to a report most of the congregation ‘seemed not to notice the students’.¹⁵⁵ Three of the students were subsequently arrested when a ‘policeman directing traffic nearby responded to “the disturbance”’.¹⁵⁶ Several of Bellevue’s members were summoned to court as witnesses, where the ‘assistant attorney described a “calculated scheme” to disrupt services at Bellevue’.¹⁵⁷ After a failed attempt by the students’ lawyer to have the allegations overthrown, they were charged with ‘disorderly conduct’.¹⁵⁸

In reference to a separate, apparently more successful, kneel-in, Pollard recalled a time “when one of the international leaders...[Ralph] Abernathy [the minister and civil rights campaigner]...came here and brought about forty or fifty [black activists]. It happened that there wasn’t a vacant seat downstairs, everything was full so they had to go upstairs to be seated. Nobody said a word about it”.¹⁵⁹ This event does not appear in Haynes’ study of the kneel-in movement, nor in any other secondary source dealing with the church. Meanwhile, Bill and Emily Cochran, who attended Bellevue throughout the sixties and were interviewed by the author of this thesis, were not able to recall either of these kneel-ins at Bellevue. Thus, Pollard’s reference to a successful, more peaceful kneel-in cannot be independently verified. Nonetheless, the anecdote demonstrates the church’s willingness to distinguish itself from the racism and segregationism of some of its fellow Southern Baptist congregations. To further emphasise Bellevue’s apparent openness towards African Americans, Pollard even claimed that “some of the black people started coming here” as early as Lee’s pastorate: “They have always been welcome to attend here; Dr Lee used to have some black people who heard him regularly, particularly one old white-haired Negro who came here. So there was no objection on the part of Bellevue.”¹⁶⁰ This is corroborated with the views of Mr and Mrs Cochran who, despite not remembering the kneel-ins, claimed there was “very little or no hostility” towards African Americans at the church during the sixties.¹⁶¹

Although Bellevue’s experiences of the kneel-ins did not always run quite as smoothly as Pollard would have wanted, the church’s responses to the protestors nonetheless demonstrate that the vast majority of those involved with the church wanted to worship in a racially moderate environment. There was little active hostility towards the principle of integrated worshipping at Bellevue, either from the pastor or from individual members of the congregation itself. However, despite this racial tolerance the church never actively sought to minister to the city’s African American population. The church did its best to tolerate African Americans when they entered, but it did not attempt to bring them to the church on a permanent basis. Similarly, Bellevue’s leaders had no intention of making the church a site for publically discussing America’s “race problem”, like more liberal evangelical churches had

¹⁵⁴ “Two Negroes, White Arrested at Church,” *Tri-State Defender*, September 3, 1960, p. 2, quoted from *Ibid*; Haynes, *The Last Segregated Hour*, p. 26.

¹⁵⁵ Haynes, *The Last Segregated Hour*, p. 26.

¹⁵⁶ “Two Negroes, White Arrested at Church”, p. 2.

¹⁵⁷ Haynes, *The Last Segregated Hour*, p. 26.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid*.

¹⁵⁹ Pollard, interview by May, p. 34 – 5.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p. 34.

¹⁶¹ Bill and Emily Cochran, interview by author.

been doing since the genesis of the civil rights movement. Meanwhile, throughout the civil rights movement and beyond, Bellevue essentially stayed faithful to the view that black and white audiences were always likely to worship separately. As Pollard himself articulated when discussing the possibility of black worshippers regularly attending Bellevue in the wake of the kneel-ins: “They [African Americans] are not going to come to your church [often], they don’t want to come. They’ve got better preachers than we have in the first place, and they want to be with their own people”.¹⁶²

Conclusion

The main aim of this chapter has been to illustrate Bellevue’s approaches towards race and segregation during the civil rights movement. After chronicling Bellevue’s progression from a small church on the east side of a growing city to a thriving megachurch, this chapter discussed how it was forced to develop tangible stances towards integration and racial equality. Bellevue adopted a moderate stance towards race which, as the discussion of the concurrent rift in the SBC demonstrated, placed the church at the ideological centre of discourses on race. Meanwhile, this chapter has showed that Bellevue had a laissez-faire approach towards its surrounding environment in the 1960s, which was a symptom of its particular brand of theology, as well as its assumptions about racially segregated worshipping in the post-*Brown* world. Individual responsibility had long been at the heart of the moral worldview of this strand of theologically conservative evangelicalism. The church’s dominant concern was with evangelising rather than with redeeming social problems such as racial inequality. Pollard insisted that it was simply not the duty of the church to intervene on community matters: “This idea that the main business of the church is to build apartment houses and a new sewer system for the city, or to lead out in other social activities, is not the main objective of the church,” he argued.¹⁶³ Meanwhile, sensing the importance of Bellevue’s reaction to the kneel-in movement, Pollard made an effort to ensure that the protesters’ presence was tolerated in the church. Bellevue’s status as one of the largest congregations in the SBC—as opposed to marginal congregations, which were much more likely to harbour segregationist ideology—also helped safeguard its racially centrist position. However, Pollard was also responsible for helping perpetuate the assumption that blacks and whites were destined to always worship separately, irrespective of the impact of federal and civil desegregation initiatives. In the context of the changing ethnic and demographic dynamics of the Midtown neighbourhood, this attitude would have important long term implications for the church. As subsequent chapters will show, Bellevue’s lack of engagement with its neighbourhood’s increasingly diverse ethnic composition—combined with a corresponding strengthening of ties between the church and socioeconomic phenomenon of “white flight”—would not only pave the way for its suburbanisation but also help create a distinct political culture which fostered the conservative evangelical alignment with the Republican Party.

¹⁶² Pollard, interview by May, p. 35.

¹⁶³ Ibid, p. 15-6, 15.

Chapter 2: Becoming Suburban: The Post-Pollard Revival and Bellevue's Connections with "White Flight" and the Suburbs, 1972 - 1980

The events at Bellevue and in Memphis are a testament to the notion that the 1970s were at least as transformative in religious, socioeconomic and political terms as the decades that directly preceded and succeeded them.¹⁶⁴ At the turn of the decade Memphis was still reeling from the trauma inflicted on the city by the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr at a Downtown motel less than two years earlier. Residual tensions left behind by King's death and the previous ten years of civil rights unrest did nothing to alleviate the atmosphere of racial polarisation and division that plagued the city. Rather than fading with the passage of time, these divisions were in many ways accentuated by the post-civil rights racial, economic and political landscape. The implementation of busing, the political economy of the Sunbelt and the politics of suburban planning resulted in a bipolar racial and class system in Memphis which was split physically between inner-city and suburbs. Meanwhile, in 1972, the same year that busing was first introduced in Memphis and across the nation, Bellevue welcomed its first new pastor in twelve years. Mirroring the trends of evangelical attendance at a national level, Dr Adrian Rogers' first eight years at Bellevue's helm would be characterised by extraordinary growth. The aim of this chapter is to explain how Bellevue's post-Pollard revival was achieved, and more importantly, to explore how this growth related to post-civil rights era urban change in Memphis.

It is demonstrated in this chapter that during the early years of the Rogers pastorate Bellevue maintained its laissez-faire approach towards attracting African Americans. In fact, the church appeared to have a deliberate strategy of targeting whites from different age and class groups to the predominantly older, working class groups that remained at the church in the wake of the Pollard pastorate. Rogers' preaching charisma and inerrantist theology appealed to the conservative religious culture of white Memphis, which despite moving away from the inner-city was not uprooting from the city altogether. Indeed, the theological and cultural characteristics of the church made Bellevue an ideal environment for the religiously and politically conservative whites who were beginning to be concentrated in Memphis's suburbs. Thus, unlike less popular white churches in inner-city areas, Bellevue was not forced to contemplate "reaching out" to the burgeoning ethnic minority presence of the local neighbourhood. In the context of Memphis's extreme levels of "white flight", the significance of Bellevue's continued popularity with whites was that the church started to develop increasingly strong connections with the socioeconomic, political and cultural characteristics of the suburbs. As this chapter shows, these connections had an effect on the congregational culture of Bellevue itself. In other words, Bellevue was "becoming suburban" years before its actual relocation to the suburbs in 1989. As well as increasing the likelihood of Bellevue's relocation, the suburbanisation of Bellevue during the 1970s encouraged the creation of the church's new form of political culture, which would emerge clearly by the beginning of the

¹⁶⁴ Bruce Schulman and others have attempted to redress the historiographical bias towards the 1960s and the 1980s, justifiably arguing that it was one of the most politically, economically, culturally and religiously pivotal decades of the post-war era. See Bruce J. Schulman, *The 1970s: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society and Politics*, (Boston, MA: Da Capo Press, Ltd., 2002); see also the essays by various authors in Schulman (ed.), *Rightward Bound*.

1980s. Thus, the intersection of Bellevue's conservative theology, its growth model, and demographic change in Memphis had important effects on the church which would not be fully realised until around a decade later.

Searching for "God's Man": The Arrival of Adrian Rogers

In the afternoon of April 16, 1972, Dr Ramsey Pollard publically presented his resignation to the congregation and church leaders from Bellevue's pulpit. Once Pollard had completed his resignation speech, the church's deacons 'left their seats' and, in an unexpected 'display of unified love and loyalty...stood by' their veteran pastor's side.¹⁶⁵ The gesture signified the willingness of the church's hierarchy to defend the legacy of Pollard's tenure, which—as everyone present during the resignation speech would have known—included a particularly "testing" period in the early 1960s.¹⁶⁶ Bellevue would not fully recuperate from its decline in membership until after Pollard's retirement; but during the second half of his pastorate Pollard did manage to avoid any further significant congregational discord or instability, and from the mid-1960s onwards the congregation even started to show modest signs of recovery. For example, according to Bellevue's official pastoral history, Pollard strengthened the church's ministries, including a programme for the Jewish community and a "Medical Professions Day" hosting students working at the nearby hospital.¹⁶⁷ Pollard was also responsible for raising the funds for an "activities building", which was designed for evangelistic outreach activities and recreational purposes. The building was completed in 1966, and named the Pollard Activities Building in 1970 to honour the pastor's tenth anniversary at the church.¹⁶⁸ Between 1965 and 1970, Bellevue even managed to attain a modest increase in the size of its congregation, from 8,110 to 8,679 members.¹⁶⁹ Though Pollard's tenure has been considered a mere 'holding pattern' in between the successful pastorates of Robert G. Lee and Adrian Rogers, after the resignation speech the church's officials nonetheless waxed lyrical about the pastor's achievements over the course of his twelve years at the church.¹⁷⁰

In his resignation speech Pollard argued that Bellevue's next pastor needed to be "God's man" for the "tremendous and challenging years ahead".¹⁷¹ And after the controversy and stagnation that characterised the previous twelve years, Bellevue's hierarchy were no-doubt hoping that Dr Adrian Rogers, the man chosen to succeed Pollard, was nothing less than a pastor endorsed by God Himself. Born in West Palm Beach, Florida in 1931, Rogers was still only forty years old when three members of Bellevue's Pulpit Committee came to see him speak at the Southern Baptist Convention Pastors Conference in Philadelphia in 1972. If the Committee's interest in a relatively young pastor was intentional, then they were probably

¹⁶⁵ *By His Grace*, p. 89.

¹⁶⁶ This was the word used by the official church history. *Ibid*.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid*, p. 86.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid*.

¹⁶⁹ *Shelby County Baptist Association*, "Annual Sessions, 1965 Minutes" and "Annual Sessions, 1970 Minutes". Bellevue Baptist Church, Cordova, TN.

¹⁷⁰ Hankins, "White Flight, Shift to the Right", p. 4.

¹⁷¹ Ramsey Pollard, quoted in *By His Grace*, p. 89.

in search of a preacher who would stay at Bellevue for decades, and potentially expand the church in similar vein to what Lee had achieved prior to Pollard. Other “non-negotiable” criteria for Bellevue’s next pastor were ‘an unshakable commitment to the inerrancy of God’s Word and a burning zeal to lead the lost to Christ’.¹⁷² Based on the sermon he had delivered at the Conference, the Committee were satisfied that Rogers possessed these qualities, as well as a ‘supreme desire of his heart’ to become a “man of God”.¹⁷³ Although prior to the Conference no one at Bellevue had even heard of Rogers, he soon became the leading candidate to succeed Pollard.

Between 1964 and 1972 Rogers pastored at First Baptist Church, Merritt Island, Florida, overlooking the Kennedy Space Station. Prior to this Rogers studied at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary and completed successful pastorates at Baptist churches in Waveland, Mississippi, and Fort Pierce, Florida. Rogers settled down in Merritt Island to raise his children, and he turned First Baptist into a highly successful congregation with a young membership. He baptised an average of 350 people per year while at Merritt Island, bringing about an impressive five-fold increase in the church’s membership—from 300 to 1,500 members—in just eight years.¹⁷⁴ After hearing about First Baptist’s remarkable growth Gene Howard, one of Bellevue’s Pulpit Committee members, travelled to Merritt Island to see Rogers preach. Howard was impressed with how “people of all ages [were there] with their Bibles opened, following what he [Rogers] was saying”.¹⁷⁵ Like the rest of the Committee, Howard was convinced that Rogers should be Bellevue’s first choice for its next pastor. However, with a wife a young children settled in Merritt Island, and a thriving congregation to preach at, Rogers was content as pastor at First Baptist. According to Rogers’ daughter, Janice Ediston, “my dad wasn’t interested [in the Bellevue job]. He said he was very happy being pastor at First Baptist, Merritt Island. And we truly expected that he would stay there”.¹⁷⁶ But while holidaying north of Florida with some of his family, Rogers received a message from his son back home which said that Bellevue was trying to get in contact with him. Rogers “felt bad about the time that they had spent getting into contact with him” so they took a detour to Memphis while they were still on vacation.¹⁷⁷ During that first meeting at Bellevue, the Pulpit Committee agreed to let Rogers preach at the church a single time, “just to get a feel for it”.¹⁷⁸ This was scheduled for August 13, when Rogers preached a sermon entitled “How to Please God” from Bellevue’s pulpit. After the sermon, which was extremely well-received by the congregation, ‘Dr Rogers adjourned to the Pastor’s study’.¹⁷⁹ While he was there, and without his knowledge, the Pulpit Committee conducted a poll and the congregation unanimously voted in favour of Rogers becoming the next pastor. With both the Pulpit Committee and the membership on board, all that was left to do was for Rogers to make

¹⁷² Ibid, p. 92.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid; Hankins, “White Flight, Shift to the Right”, p. 6.

¹⁷⁵ Gene Howard, quoted in *By His Grace*, p. 94.

¹⁷⁶ Janice Ediston, telephone interview with the author, December 5, 2014.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ *By His Grace*, p. 98.

his decision. On the same day he called his family and told his daughter she “was going to be a Memphis girl”.¹⁸⁰

There were several things that took Rogers and his family by surprise once they arrived at Bellevue in September 1972 and began to settle down to living in Memphis. The first was just how different their new environment was compared with their old home in Florida. The high-tech industrial culture of Merritt Island that surrounded First Baptist created a “totally different” atmosphere to that of Midtown Memphis.¹⁸¹ Ediston grew up watching the rockets launched from the Kennedy Space Center, which could even be seen from their family home lifting off. She was around eight years old when NASA launched the Apollo 13 mission from the Merritt Island Centre in April 1970. Thanks to the changes wrought by the space travel industry and other high-tech trades, Florida became an early example of a Sunbelt state, so that environments like Merritt Island often shared more common economic and cultural characteristics with Californian towns than they did with the cities of fellow Southeastern states such as Mississippi and Alabama. Meanwhile, in the early seventies much of Memphis—including Midtown—was economically and socially deprived. Unemployment and poverty levels were high, and the city had barely begun its attempts to alleviate the racial tensions caused by the civil rights movement and the assassination of Dr Martin Luther King, Jr. in a downtown Memphis motel four years earlier. All of this felt like a world away from the middle class prosperity of Merritt Island. In an interview conducted decades later, Adrian Rogers described the culture of Merritt Island as “more eclectic” and “cosmopolitan” in comparison with Memphis. In Florida, “we have people who come from all over, especially there in the space centre”.¹⁸² Rogers argued that “You are more in the South in Memphis than you are in Florida. Memphis is the Deep South”.¹⁸³ On this latter point the pastor was no-doubt referring to the typically ‘southern’ traits of racial tension, economic ‘backwardness’ and poverty that plagued much of Memphis and was relatively absent from Merritt Island.

The second observation Rogers and his family made upon arriving in Memphis was the graciousness of the congregation and the sense of welcome they received at their new church. Rogers’ daughter recalled how much effort the congregation had made to make the whole family feel comfortable and accepted.¹⁸⁴ But equally noticeable was the difference between their current and former churches in terms of how busy they were during Sunday services. By the time Rogers had left First Baptist, Merritt Island, each Sunday the sanctuary was filled to its maximum capacity with worshippers. In contrast, during Rogers’ first sermons at Bellevue the ‘20-year-old sanctuary...was only about two thirds filled each Sunday’.¹⁸⁵ Of course, in 1972 the membership at Bellevue was far greater than First Baptist’s (which was around 1,500 in comparison with Bellevue’s 8,739); but whereas just twelve years earlier Bellevue had comfortably attracted enough people to fill its 3,000 seat sanctuary, by

¹⁸⁰ Ediston, interview with author.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Adrian Rogers, interview with Barry Hankins, “Oral Memoirs of Adrian Rogers”, *Baylor University Institute for Oral History*, August 18, 1997, p. 3.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Ediston, interview with author.

¹⁸⁵ *By His Grace*, p. 97.

the end of Pollard's tenure there was imply no longer the same demand to worship there. It was clear that Dr Pollard had left the church in a state of deterioration, as Janice Ediston had noticed: "Bellevue was in a kind of decline when we arrived. I think the attendance of Sunday school at the church we left was probably higher than at Bellevue at the time. Even though the church [Bellevue] was much bigger and well known, we still came from a church that was running bigger numbers".¹⁸⁶ This was a cause for deep concern for everyone involved in the church, and was likely to have been a key reason why the Pulpit Committee targeted Rogers as Pollard's replacement. Ediston believed that one of the reasons why First Baptist was growing to such an extent was Rogers' ability to attract younger worshippers. Bellevue, by contrast, was a congregation made up of much older members. Ediston remembered going, in 1972, from "from a church with all these young married couples to a predominantly older congregation".¹⁸⁷ Meanwhile, Rogers subsequently recalled how during his first sermon at the church "it felt like I was looking at a snowstorm".¹⁸⁸ Pollard's failure to attract the young had thus undoubtedly contributed towards the church's decline. And as Rogers would bluntly put it in an interview years later, "It is a fact that when a church ceases to grow it begins to die".¹⁸⁹ Rogers' most obvious challenges in the years ahead was therefore to restore Bellevue's growth to the levels it had achieved during Lee's pastorate.

Bellevue's Post-Pollard Revival and the Nationwide Growth of Conservative Evangelicalism in the 1970s

The task of rejuvenating Bellevue after twelve years of stagnation was therefore a daunting one. But by ushering in a new wave of extraordinary growth that began almost immediately, the Floridian pastor soon put to rest any doubts that Bellevue members may have had about the arrival of their new preacher. Within a few years it became clear that Bellevue under the leadership of Dr Rogers had the potential to not only match the growth levels of the Lee era, but to actually surpass them. Indeed, as an indication of what was to come over the course of his thirty-three years at the church, thousands of new members flocked to the church during the first three years of Rogers' pastorate. The new pastor's success was thanks to a number of different factors. To begin with, Rogers displayed a willingness to expand Bellevue's ministries and reach out to new members in ways that his predecessor's somewhat low-risk leadership style lacked. Moreover, Rogers' charismatic preaching style was so popular with southern evangelicals that during his first decade as Bellevue pastor he had gained the kind of celebrity following and reputation that resembled that of pastor Lee twenty years earlier. However, this chapter argues that the best way to understand Bellevue's growth during the 1970s is to place it within the context of the broader growth patterns of conservative evangelicalism during the same period. As other studies have already demonstrated, the central reason why churches like Bellevue grew from the 1970s onwards was that they offered a clear and unambiguous sense of meaning to social conservatives who, in the wake of the

¹⁸⁶ Ediston, interview with author.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Adrian Rogers, quoted in Balmer, "Churchgoing: Bellevue Baptist Church near Memphis", p. 488.

¹⁸⁹ "Adrian Rogers: 'Q & A'", in "Sponsored Supplement". *The Commercial Appeal*, November 12, 1989, p. 8. Adrian Rogers folder, DMCF.

resurgent liberalism of the civil rights movement, had started to feel disillusioned by the relatively moderate stances of “mainline” Protestant denominations.¹⁹⁰ As a pastor who articulated his theological conservatism in a particularly uncompromising and charismatic manner, Rogers appealed profoundly to this demographic, a disproportionate number of whom resided in the South. In other words, although Rogers was in theological terms no more conservative than his predecessors, his leadership and preaching style made him more suited to exploit the explosion of post-civil rights conservative religiosity that occurred after the 1960s.

The instantaneous spike in membership that Bellevue benefitted from upon the arrival of Rogers can in part be explained by the excitement caused by the inauguration of the church’s first new pastor in twelve years. Word spread quickly whenever a new pastor was initiated at a church as large as Bellevue, and this interest inevitably translated into greater attendance figures. Janice Ediston recalled that everybody “knew there a new pastor in town so they all wanted to come and see him in person”.¹⁹¹ She also remembered how the church’s television ministry, which had been airing Sunday sermons to homes across the region since 1958, further extended the reach of Rogers’ appeal. The rapid spread of Rogers’ profile thanks to word of mouth and the television ministry created a surge in demand to worship at Bellevue. As a result, the week-on-week membership of Bellevue rose dramatically. According to Ediston, “pretty much every service...around fifty people was the norm for joining”. Each Sunday, “people were scrambling to get to the front row of the church”.¹⁹² In the spring of 1973—half a year after his arrival—Rogers launched a ‘three-month campaign’ to attract new members.¹⁹³ The initiative culminated in a “Miracle Day”, which saw the church host a ‘record high Sunday School service attendance of 4,567’.¹⁹⁴ Meanwhile, between 1970 and 1975 Bellevue’s membership grew by over two thousand, the largest increase over the course of a five-year period since 1940 to 1945.¹⁹⁵ Over the same period Sunday school enrolment increased by 1,300 and the total amount of charity receipts received almost doubled to \$1.7m.¹⁹⁶

Judging by the similarities between the two popular preachers, it was no accident that Rogers achieved similar levels of growth to what Dr Lee had accomplished at the church decades earlier. There were several commonalities between the pastoring styles of Lee and Rogers which clearly resonated with Memphis’s white evangelicals. Firstly, just like his illustrious predecessor, Rogers possessed the potent blend of a charismatic preaching style and a strict inerrantist theology, the combination of which undoubtedly drew many new members to the church. Rogers referred to himself as an “inerrantist conservative”, and was comfortable being referred to as a ‘fundamentalist’ so long as the term was understood as “somebody who believes in the fundamentals of the faith, fundamentals of the faith being to me the basis of all that is the Bible, word of God, the deity of Christ...and all these basic truths

¹⁹⁰ See, in particular, Dean M. Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*.

¹⁹¹ Ediston, interview with author.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ *By His Grace*, p. 103.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ *Shelby County Baptist Association*, “Annual Sessions, 1970 Minutes” and “Annual Sessions, 1975 Minutes”. Bellevue Baptist Church, Cordova, TN

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

that we—I believe, as Baptists—have held historically as being true”.¹⁹⁷ According to Ediston, Rogers “spoke very boldly” about his commitment to theological conservatism.¹⁹⁸ She claimed that a large part of his appeal was that “people heard somebody who told it like it is, and [did not] not apologise for [speaking] the word of God”. The scale of Rogers’ commitment towards biblical inerrancy, as well as his intolerance towards liberal strands of theology, is also demonstrated by the important role the pastor would play in the SBC’s Conservative Resurgence. Although Dr Pollard also used the platform of a SBC presidency to condemn theological liberalism, it would not be unreasonable to suggest that Rogers’ enthusiasm for decrying liberal theology and defending biblical inerrancy exceeded that of his predecessor. Rogers’ unequivocal conservatism lay at the heart of his popularity, but his preaching style also contributed.¹⁹⁹ Rogers quickly gained the nickname “Old Golden Throat” because of the smooth sound and assertive delivery of his preaching voice. As Ediston recalled, “it was so magical when he was speaking...the spirit was guiding him”.²⁰⁰ Overall, as a preacher Rogers is often considered to be in the same “great preacher” category as that which Lee had belonged to during his time at Bellevue.²⁰¹

Another way in which Rogers was evocative of Lee was his willingness to expand Bellevue’s activities and ministries. Rogers fulfilled his duties as pastor with an entrepreneurial ethos that Pollard seemed to lack, but which was certainly reminiscent of Lee. Lee and Rogers were, after all, the only two post-war Bellevue pastors to have overseen the completion of brand new sanctuaries. Rogers’ programmes at the church centred around growth and expansion from the very beginning. Rogers “was always doing programmes, he always very conscious of growing. He would also have ‘high attendance days’. He would always have a goal, where he would aim for a higher number of attendees”.²⁰² Part of his formula for increasing attendance was to expand the different platforms the church had for expressing and spreading the Gospel message. Aided by the television ministry, which transmitted Bellevue’s activities to an audience which would have been unimaginable a few decades earlier, Rogers sought to increase the appeal of the church by diversifying the range of events held in the church’s Worship Centre. Rather than merely hosting baptisms and sermons, Bellevue’s pews would also begin to serve as venues for numerous other Gospel-related performances. As Janice Ediston put it, her father was “big on making shows”.²⁰³ One of the most ambitious of Rogers’ “shows” was the *Singing Christmas Tree*, an annual festive play performed in the Worship Centre featuring a giant Christmas Tree filled with a choir. Whatever the artistic merits of the *Singing Christmas Tree*, it was an undoubted success with the church’s congregants and the thousands of followers watching via Bellevue’s television portal; ever since the inaugural show in 1976, it has been performed during the festive period every year of the Rogers pastorate and beyond. The hardback book published by Bellevue to celebrate its centenary refers to Rogers’ idea of attracting members through “making shows”

¹⁹⁷ Rogers, interview with Hankins, p. 3.

¹⁹⁸ Ediston, interview with author.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Greer, “Bellevue Baptist Church”, p. 151.

²⁰² Ediston, interview with author.

²⁰³ Ibid.

as a ‘bold step forward’ for the church.²⁰⁴ The publication even claims that a substantial number of new members were attracted to the church as a direct result of the *Singing Christmas Tree* show.²⁰⁵ One piece of evidence supporting this claim is that on April 17, 1977—four months after the debut of the show—Bellevue introduced a second Sunday morning worship service, the first time the church deemed such a move necessary since the latest sanctuary was completed in 1952.²⁰⁶

As part of his interest in integrating the Gospel message into new performing arts shows, Rogers was also quick to invest in the church’s music ministry. Perhaps the most astute facet of this was that it seems to have displayed an awareness of how, from the 1970s onwards, music was slowly becoming an integral part of “Christian Youth Culture”—a largely untapped audience of young evangelicals who adopted politically, socially and theologically conservative views but ‘saw no reason to give up their electric guitars’.²⁰⁷ Christian rock, which fused secular popular music influences together with devout, born-again content, would help keep a younger generation of evangelicals engaged with the religious and even political aims of the broader movement. Eventually, Christian rock, in its myriad different forms and variations, would become an accepted, relatively uncontroversial medium with which to spread the Gospel. Although Bellevue’s role in all of this was minor, the expansion of its music ministry suggests that the church was beginning to make concerted efforts to attract younger audiences. Although, as Pollard had proved, it was usually not difficult to hold on to older laypeople, appealing to younger audiences often involved using more imaginative ways of communicating the Gospel. Music was one of the forms that was used, particularly from the 1970s onwards, to make evangelical religious discourse more relevant to younger people. In another display of Rogers’ willingness to make Bellevue a younger congregation, the church’s new pastor even brought the youth minister of his old pastorate at First Baptist, Merritt Island with him to Bellevue.²⁰⁸ Rogers and the youth minister had succeeded in making First Baptist a younger congregation, and now they were working on doing the same at Bellevue. In his study of the church’s pastoral history, Bellevue layman Dan Greer has argued that reducing the average age of the congregation was an integral part of the growth model implemented by Dr Rogers. Writing in the early 1990s, shortly after Bellevue’s relocation to the suburbs, Greer claimed that the proportion of senior adults at the church had been reduced from sixteen percent four years earlier to ten percent at the time of writing.²⁰⁹ This was the culmination of a project which was initiated twenty years earlier by a pastor who was acutely aware of the need to revitalise what his aging congregation. ‘We are now a church growing younger by the day, with significant numbers of young married adults joining our congregation,’ argued Greer.²¹⁰

²⁰⁴ *By His Grace*, p. 103.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁷ Daniel K. Williams, “Evangelical Economics: Re-examining Christian Political Culture from a Market-Based Perspective”, review of *Witnessing Suburbia: Conservatives and Christian Youth Culture*, by Eileen Luhr. *Reviews in American History*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (March 2011), pp. 175 – 184, p. 180.

²⁰⁸ Ediston, interview with author.

²⁰⁹ Greer, “Bellevue Baptist Church”, p. 34.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*

It is, of course, possible that Bellevue's post-Pollard revival could have been achieved by targeting some of the many African Americans who had been moving to Midtown in the wake of desegregation and busing. In the early 1970s blacks were still a minority in Midtown but they were by far the fastest growing racial group in the neighbourhood. This trend would continue for decades, and by the end of the twentieth century blacks would make up a clear majority in Midtown, with two thirds of the population being African American.²¹¹ One solution to the decline of the church up until 1972 could therefore have been to embrace 'the changes in the city's population' by "reaching out" to the local African American population.²¹² In practice, however, this did not happen. There is no doubt that the vast majority of Bellevue's increase in membership under Rogers was realised by attracting a whites from different age and class groups, rather than by breaking the colour line. Unlike smaller white congregations in inner-city locations, Bellevue did not struggle to attract members from surrounding neighbourhoods; it had the resources, personnel (i.e., the allure of Rogers), and facilities to draw audiences from other districts of the city, and even neighbouring counties. In other words, Bellevue was a "regional" church (the definition of which overlaps significantly with "megachurch"), in the sense that "people from all over would come to attend".²¹³ One of the most important characteristics of large, regional churches is that once they 'reach the critical mass of 2,000 members, sheer size alone enables [them] to lure more followers'.²¹⁴

The enduring whiteness of Bellevue inevitably created an increasingly broad racial gulf between the congregation and the neighbourhood that surrounded it. As Midtown continued along the road of its demographic transformation, the size of this discrepancy would grow until, in 1989, the church completed its relocation to a neighbourhood where over 90% of the population was white. But in the absence of any conscious attempt to attract minorities to the church, the racial uniformity of Bellevue should not come as too much of a surprise. In many respects it was simpler and easier to attract new white members living several miles away than it was to appeal to the church's much more local black populations. This was largely due to the cultural, theological, and political differences between black and white Protestant congregations in the United States—and particularly in the South—which have become deeply entrenched over the course of the last three centuries. These differences have created barriers to racial integration which could only be overcome with substantial effort from both the black and white religious communities. In their seminal study of racial divisions in the history of American evangelicalism, Michael Emerson and Christian Smith argue that the most irreconcilable division between white and black evangelical culture has been their respective interpretations of racial inequality.²¹⁵ Whereas white evangelicals have tended to believe in individualistic ideas about 'how social change happens', their black

²¹¹ "Midtown, Memphis, TN Demographics", Areavibes Inc., accessed May 6, 2015, <http://www.areavibes.com/memphis-tn/midtown/demographics/>.

²¹² Trundle, "Doctrine, Demographics, and the Decline of the Southern Baptist Convention", p. 90.

²¹³ Emily Cochran, interview with author.

²¹⁴ Richard N. Ostling, "Superchurches and How They Grow," *Time* 138, August 1991, p. 63. Quoted from Greer, "Bellevue Baptist Church", p. 53.

²¹⁵ Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided By Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

coreligionists have often been acutely aware of the structural causes of racial inequality.²¹⁶ These opposing approaches towards racial inequality closely correlate with stark theological differences, which have proven to be largely incompatible.²¹⁷ Lastly, the continuation of de facto segregation in churches has ‘contribute[d] towards the divergent demographic and racial perspectives of blacks and whites’.²¹⁸ Throughout its history, all three of these barriers have applied to Bellevue, whose conservative theology prioritised individual soul winning over collective responses to social problems like racism. Overcoming these obstacles to racial integration has been a formidable task for even the sincerest and devoted attempts to racially integrate America’s churches. The progress of “racial reconciliation” efforts has been slow; indeed, movements such as the Evangelical Racial Change advocates did not gather momentum until at least the 1990s.²¹⁹ Therefore, without even the slightest attempt to attract African American worshippers, it is not surprising that the Bellevue’s racial makeup stayed white even as Midtown was in the midst of a demographic transformation which eventually shifted its overall racial composition into a majority-black neighbourhood.

As well as Rogers’ skills as a pastor and his strategy of attracting younger worshippers, another significant factor related to Bellevue’s growth were the broader growth trends of white evangelicalism during the 1970s. The first few years of Rogers’ tenure corresponded to the beginning of a period of extraordinary change for Protestantism in the United States, as mainline denominations declined and evangelical congregations grew exponentially. After reaching their historical peak sometime in the 1950s, the membership figures of mainline denominations began shrink dramatically from the late 1960s. Each of the five major ecumenical denominations—namely, the Episcopal Church, the United Presbyterian Church, the United Methodist Church, the United Church of Christ and the Lutheran Church in America—each lost hundreds of thousands of members within the space of five years.²²⁰ And rather than representing a mere blip during a period of resurgent secularism, this decline would continue throughout the second half of the twentieth century and beyond, with mainline membership falling from 31 million in 1965 to 25 million in 1988.²²¹ Meanwhile, membership of non-ecumenical, theologically conservative denominations—most of which are evangelical—exploded. Between 1965 and 1975 the Southern Baptist Convention alone amassed two million new members, the sharpest increase in followers over a ten-year period in the denomination’s history. By the middle of the 1970s the SBC was the largest Protestant denomination in the country. Sprouting from this phenomenon were so-called “megachurches”, congregations which like Bellevue had over 2,000 regular attendees and

²¹⁶ Wadsworth, *Ambivalent Miracles*, p. 23. See Emerson and Smith, *Divided By Faith*, pp. 67 – 113.

²¹⁷ Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*. By far the most common strand of theology amongst black evangelicals has been Social Gospel, while white evangelicals are much more likely to be fundamentalist. As Chapter 1 showed, more liberal impulses have existed even in the more conservative white denominations, such in the SBC; but these voices have more often than not been drowned out by the vocal majority of theologically and socially conservative groups.

²¹⁸ Wadsworth, *Ambivalent Miracles*, p. 23.

²¹⁹ The most detailed study of the Evangelical Racial Change movement is Wadsworth’s *Ambivalent Miracles*.

²²⁰ Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*, p. 6.

²²¹ Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), p. 465.

which were disproportionately evangelical (and indeed Southern Baptist) in their denominational affiliations. Thus, although Bellevue's growth during the 1970s was, even by evangelical standards, exceptional, its success was part of a far broader shift in the religious inclinations of American society in the second half of the twentieth century. In order to have a complete understanding of Bellevue's post-Pollard revival, it is therefore necessary to explicate how it related to the broader growth trends of the movement as a whole.

Dean Kelley's sociological survey was one of the first scholarly interventions on the topic of post-1960s denominational membership trends, but it remains highly relevant today. Kelley argued that the most important variable determining the strength of a church was the level of its religious "strictness" or "seriousness".²²² According to Kelley's definition, strict churches are those which are highly demanding of their members: they expect all congregants be to fully invested in the church's religious doctrine, and to participate in its activities; those that fail to meet these requirements are not allowed to continue worshipping in the congregation. Although this kind of approach deters and prevents less committed believers from joining strict churches, seriousness also produces a far higher degree of loyalty than more lenient approaches. This means that even if tolerant churches are able to attract a greater *quantity* of potential members, stricter congregations hold on to their adherents much more easily. Another component of Kelley's "strictness" model is that in the current religious marketplace churches which 'do not confuse' their faith 'with other beliefs, loyalties, or practices, or mingle them together indiscriminately,' are more successful.²²³ Kelley cites a study which found that laypeople tended to believe the three most important activities of any church should be winning others to Christ, providing worship services and giving spiritual instruction.²²⁴ Although other activities such as 'helping the needy' and 'supporting minority groups' were deemed to be important, churches which more vigorously focussed on the higher priorities attracted more members and facilitated greater loyalty.²²⁵ Conversely, churches which prioritise initiatives such as the eradication of poverty over inherently spiritual matters are more likely to lose members because they are seen as diluting religious meaning and as a digression from the actual purpose of the church. In sum, argues Kelley, it is not conservatism *per se* which made conservative churches in the United States so successful; rather, it was that conservative churches were far more likely to adopt strict, uncompromising approaches towards their religious beliefs than their more liberal counterparts.²²⁶ In the United States, mainline denominations have historically played prominent role in the social gospel movement which, according to Kelley, is a key reason why more liberal churches were declining. 'Those who confuse' social action and religious meaning 'run the risk of losing the comparatively reliable allegiance of the adherents of

²²² Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*.

²²³ *Ibid*, p. 176.

²²⁴ George Cornell and Douglas Johnson, *Punctured Preconceptions*, (New York: Friendship Press, 1972). Cited in *Ibid*, p. ix.

²²⁵ *Ibid*, p. x.

²²⁶ To elucidate Kelley's argument further: 'The quality which makes one system of ultimate meaning more convincing than another is not its content but its seriousness/strictness/costliness/bindingness'. P. xii.

religious bodies without obtaining loyalty of comparable reliability from a new constituency to take its place,' he concludes.²²⁷

Kelley's claims are in many ways supported by Bellevue's success as a megachurch. As Chapter 1 demonstrates, Bellevue has always prioritised evangelism above all other initiatives. Moreover, Bellevue's strong and uncompromising inerrantism fulfils the criterion of spiritual "seriousness" laid out by Kelley.²²⁸ Indeed, once Rogers arrived at Bellevue the impetus behind these initiatives intensified. Rogers' determination to attract as many new members as possible further strengthened the church's commitment to evangelism. Meanwhile, although Rogers' beliefs did not in any qualitative sense differ from Pollard and Lee before him, he arguably preached his theological convictions more forcefully than his predecessors. According to the Kelley framework, this could have resulted in a further increase in the perceived purity of Bellevue's religious agenda. Lastly, Rogers' unique preaching charisma could be said to have further entrenched the convincingness of Bellevue's "system of meaning".²²⁹ Although Kelley's monograph was published almost forty-five years ago, more recent scholarship on the topic would appear vindicate at least one of the study's most important findings. For example, Roger Finke and Rodney Stark's much more recent study of church membership patterns complements Kelley's suggestion that the success of a denomination is related to the degree of spiritual commitment that churches expect from their members.²³⁰ Finke and Stark's claims work in a similar way to Kelley's concept of "strictness". Viewing religion as a marketplace of competing spiritual commodities, they argue that the larger the "cost" of belonging to a church, the greater the reward is for people who are willing to accept such a cost. Churches which have a stricter approach towards their doctrines foster a higher degree of loyalty from more serious worshippers. Meanwhile, stricter churches have mechanisms in place to deter less serious worshippers—who are seen as diluting the value of the spiritual commodity being practiced—from joining.

Nonetheless, with the benefit of an extra forty years of historical perspective, researchers working in the twenty-first century have been able to expose some significant gaps in Kelley's analysis. To begin with, Finke and Stark are highly sceptical of Kelley's assumption that there was a sudden "eruption" of evangelical religiosity in the 1960s, arguing such reasoning is 'based on a distorted historical perspective'.²³¹ More importantly for the sake of this thesis, two areas of post-1960s denominational growth trends that Kelley's study overlooks are the topics of race and demographics. The interrelationships between race and church growth have particularly important ramifications for Southern Baptist churches like Bellevue, whose patterns of post-1960s growth were so heavily dependent on whites. Andrew Trundle has discussed how the changing demographic and racial dynamics of Shelby County,

²²⁷ Ibid, p. 152.

²²⁸ According to Kelley, 'groups which preserve their seriousness through strictness will not only mediate effective meaning to their members and others, but as a consequence will thrive and grow'. P. 178.

²²⁹ Ibid, p. xii.

²³⁰ Although Finke and Stark are also sceptical about the common claim made by Kelley and others that the 1960s represented a sudden turning point in the fortunes of mainline and evangelical denominations. The turn towards conservative religious forms had, they argue, actually been occurring gradually for the previous two hundred years. See Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America*, p. 246.

²³¹ Ibid, p. 246.

Tennessee—which encompasses Memphis and its surrounding suburbs—have affected the membership rates of the SBC.²³² Ever since the early 1990s the SBC has been declining in Shelby County, and Trundle argues that this is because of the denomination’s failure to attract non-white members. In other words, so long as there were enough whites in the region, the SBC churches’ racial uniformity was unproblematic; however, towards the end of the century, as the population of African Americans in Shelby County started to exceed that of whites, the denomination’s membership and market share began to suffer. According to Trundle, the two main reasons for the failure of the SBC to attract African Americans are the denomination’s reputation problems and its conservative doctrine. African Americans not only tend to practice more socially and theologically liberal forms of Protestantism, but also, ‘in Finke’s and Stark’s economic model, the cost of being a Southern Baptist’ was simply too high.²³³ It is hardly a revelation that the success of Bellevue and other conservative churches during the 1970s hinged on attracting whites, who were far more likely to attend “strict”, theologically conservative churches. However, the effects that this racial uniformity had on congregations during a period of intense urban change are far less acknowledged or understood. After discussing Memphis’s transition from a fixation on desegregation to a preoccupation with busing, this chapter examines the links Bellevue had started to form with “white flight” in the 1970s, and the numerous understudied effects of these connections.

From Desegregation to Busing: The Acceleration of “White Flight” in Memphis

Early on in Rogers’ tenure there was one incident which would remind Bellevue’s congregation that the issues that had forced themselves into every southerner’s conscience in the decade before were still very much alive. In around 1972, a young African American man came to Bellevue during a Sunday to be converted. In keeping with the church’s routine for converting new members, Rogers brought the man to the pulpit and at the end of the ceremony asked the congregation if there was anyone who opposed to his evangelisation. At this point “one old lady raised her hand”, and Rogers asked the woman to explain to the rest of the church why she disapproved of the conversion. She replied that God did not intend for “the Negro and the white man to worship together”. Rogers responded by declaring that he would resign from the church if anyone was turned away because of their race. According to Rogers’ daughter Janice Ediston, Rogers was not aware of how the church would react to this, but that in the end “the whole congregation spontaneously came to their feet and applauded” his assertion.²³⁴ The episode of the young black man converting at Bellevue is representative of the church’s approach towards integration in the 1970s, and it also hints at the wider lack

²³² Andrew Trundle, “Doctrine, Demographics and the Decline of the Southern Baptist Convention in Shelby County, Tennessee”, *The Rhodes Journal of Regional Studies*, Vol. 2 (2005), pp. 66 – 97.

Trundle, “Doctrine, Demographics, and the Decline of the Southern Baptist Convention”.

²³³ Ibid, p. 83. This racial dimension also has the potential to problematize Kelley’s notion that the key variable of post-1960s denominational growth trends was strictness. If African Americans were still as likely to worship at more theologically liberal churches after the 1960s (as Trundle’s finding appear to suggest), then it is logical to infer that Kelley’s model can only be applied to white congregations, and not the whole racial spectrum of Protestantism in the United States.

²³⁴ Ediston, interview with author.

of progress made by the city of Memphis in implementing the *Brown* ruling. Twelve years after the kneel-in movement first forced the issue onto Bellevue, the church was, like other white congregations in the city and the region, fully “integrated” in the sense that African Americans could enter or join without any formal restraints or discrimination practices. Additionally, as the last chapter demonstrated, Bellevue’s racially moderate stance eradicated the informal barriers in the way of African Americans attending the congregation. In practice, however, this lack of formal or informal constraints made virtually no difference to the numbers of African Americans joining the church. In fact, according to Janice Ediston, “when we moved there were no blacks involved in the church” at all.²³⁵

In the early years of Rogers’ pastorate Bellevue thus continued with its racially moderate but laissez-faire policy towards ethnic minorities. Rogers, in a similar way to what his predecessor had done in 1960, publically decried racial discrimination and even risked his job in defence of the principle that African Americans should be able to freely worship at Bellevue; but the church nonetheless remained an overwhelmingly white organisation.²³⁶ As discussed in the last chapter, Bellevue’s lack of interest in “reaching out” to attract minorities was one reason for its racial uniformity during the civil rights movement and beyond. But up until 1971—when the advent of busing forced Memphis to address many of its racial imbalances—Bellevue’s lack of integration merely reflected the situation in public spaces all over the city. Indeed, the public school system of Memphis was exceedingly slow desegregate, and even in 1961—seven years after the *Brown* ruling—there was still yet to be a single black student in a white public school in the city.²³⁷ This was largely due to the political resistance to desegregation, which resulted in ‘legislation in Tennessee and elsewhere intended specifically to curtail, or at least delay, the desegregation process’.²³⁸ Although the city’s first genuine attempts at breaking the colour line were praised for their orderliness, the number of desegregated schools in 1966 was still only twenty.²³⁹ Moreover, at this point the city’s definition of what constituted an integrated school was tenuous, since a school was classified as ‘integrated’ so long as there was more than one black student studying there. A more meaningful indication of the extent to which Memphis’s schools were integrated was the total percentage of blacks enrolled at white schools. In 1966, this stood at just 2.59 percent of the city’s school-age black population, despite almost half of Memphis’s total number of pupils being African American.²⁴⁰

After periods of ‘initial inaction’ and ‘widespread resistance’, followed by some successful litigation cases challenging the constitutionality of Memphis’s slow desegregation (one of which made it all the way to the Supreme Court), the Memphis Sanitation Strike in

²³⁵ Ibid. Emphasis added.

²³⁶ In her study of the Evangelical Racial Change movement, Nancy D. Wadsworth’s definition of an “integrated” church is one with over twenty percent of its congregants from ethnic minorities. This was a figure Bellevue never came close to achieving in the 1970s and 1980s, and the church is indeed conspicuous in its absence from Wadsworth’s monograph. Wadsworth, *Ambivalent Miracles*.

²³⁷ See Kiel, “Exploded Dream”, p. 270 for year by year data on the enrolment of black students at white schools between 1954 and 1961.

²³⁸ Ibid, p 268.

²³⁹ See *ibid*, p. 277 for year by year data on the enrolment of black students at white schools between 1961 and 1966.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

1968 marked a turning point for race relations in Memphis.²⁴¹ Up until the fateful day when two black sanitation workers died gruesome deaths whilst operating faulty garbage compressors, Memphis had been celebrated as a beacon of ‘peaceful, if slow, progress’ towards racial equality.²⁴² But the increasing racial tension caused by the strike, and the shockwaves caused by the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. two months after its commencement, suddenly transformed Memphis into a symbol of the US’s “race problem”.²⁴³ Two weeks after the tragic deaths the sanitation workers—who were mostly black—had begun the strike. Demanding better wages, safer conditions, and union representation, the Sanitation Strike was in many ways a microcosm of the broader struggle against the widespread existence of inferior working conditions for blacks. Moreover, by distinctively combining worker rights with civil rights the campaign had caught the attention of Dr King, who by this point had become the nation’s leading civil rights activist. King led a solidarity march in Memphis on March 28, which turned sour when a group of African American youths left the march and started to break windows on Beale Street in downtown. Soon after, a sixteen-year-old black boy was killed by police gunfire while the security forces sought to dampen the violence. In the wake of escalating tension and violence, a curfew was introduced and the National Guard ‘move into the city’.²⁴⁴ Ever determined to keep the movement nonviolent, and aware of the potential gains to be made from the strike, Dr King came to Memphis again on April 3 ‘with plans to hold a second march’.²⁴⁵ The evening after he arrived, while he was waiting for a District Court to lift an injunction that stood in the way of another march, Dr King was shot in the neck by a bullet from a sniper while standing with friends on the balcony of his downtown motel. He was pronounced dead an hour later.

The events of 1968 effectively destroyed any ‘efforts to maintain law and order and to achieve peaceful—if slow—desegregation’ in Memphis.²⁴⁶ They also brought about a new and prolonged era of ‘greater polarization and confrontation’, not just between the black and white citizens of Memphis, but also between pro-integration campaigners and the city’s conservative political establishment.²⁴⁷ In 1967, mere months before the Sanitation Strike, Henry Loeb was elected to serve a second term as mayor of Memphis, despite intense resistance from the black community. Loeb played a key role in the polarisation of blacks and whites throughout the 1960s and early 1970s. Rather than adopting the role of mediator between the two groups during the height of Memphis’s racial crisis in 1968, Loeb spoke out against the strikers and was largely responsible for their harsh treatment by the police. A devoted segregationist throughout his career, Loeb was elected on a ‘white unity ticket’ and for his second term he received ‘less than 2%’ of the city’s black vote.²⁴⁸ The atmosphere of racial polarisation in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as well as the efforts by a conservative political administration to obstruct the forces of desegregation, resulted in severe delays to

²⁴¹ Phrases taken from *ibid.*

²⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 280.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 281.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 282.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁸ Michael K. Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King’s Last Campaign* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2008); Kiel, “Exploded Dream”, p. 280.

the progress of race relations and integration in Memphis. In no instance were these delays more noticeable than in the city's schools—so often the barometer by which the extent of a city's integration can be measured. In 1970, two years before the arrival of Dr Rogers at Bellevue, 130 of Memphis's 155 public schools were still at least 90% racially uniform, and fifty-four of those were entirely racially uniform.²⁴⁹ Additionally, thanks in part to public housing authorities deliberately practicing segregation and 'racial restrictions' all the way up until 1965, 'residential segregation in Memphis actually increased between 1950 and 1970'.²⁵⁰ At the beginning of the decade, then, little progress had been made in penetrating Memphis's colour line. Instances of neighbourhood or school integration were still relatively rare, even after public facilities such as schools and parks had been subjected to numerous litigation cases aimed at pushing through integration via the courts. Against this backdrop the racial uniformity of the city's religious institutions comes as little surprise.

Memphis's firmly entrenched segregationism, combined with Bellevue's lack of interest in attracting African American members, therefore meant the church was never likely to be anything other than uniformly white in the early 1970s. But what sealed Bellevue's racial uniformity in the longer term—as well as triggering a shift in its congregational culture over the next two decades—was the church's links with another phenomenon: "white flight". 1971 marked the beginning of a new episode in the protracted battle between the forces of integrationism and obstructionism, as the debate suddenly shifted from desegregation to busing. In that year, the Supreme Court clarified the criteria for integrated schools established by *Brown*, via the *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* ruling. On one hand, the Court decided that it was not necessary for every public school to reflect the proportion of black and white pupils in the system as a whole. Additionally, it was decided that single-race schools were not necessarily unconstitutional, so long as it could be demonstrated that pupils were not enrolled on the basis of any kind of racial discrimination. However, in *Swann* the Court also outlined the methods a district should use to ensure that it was classified as properly integrated. And more controversially, this included the 'transportation of students as a proper method of desegregation'.²⁵¹

The expectation that councils would correct insufficient levels of integration by transferring students to schools in different neighbourhoods was met with fierce and widespread opposition across the South, not least in Memphis, which had never practiced pupil transportation of any kind and was still controlled by a segregationist administration in City Hall. Indeed, resistance to busing in the early 1970s was comparable in scope to the response from many southern white communities to the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling of 1954. Mayor Loeb even introduced an ordinance which would give 'the city council line-item veto power over the school budget'.²⁵² Loeb made this move in the hope that public opposition to pupil transportation would force the Council to stop funding busing. Although the Mayor was wrong to think that his ordinance would be able to block the implementation of *Swann* in Memphis, he correctly anticipated the level of public backlash against the ruling. In April 1972, four months before the first round of busing was due to take place, the newly-formed

²⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 285.

²⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 287.

²⁵¹ Ibid, p. 290. Emphasis added.

²⁵² Ibid.

“Citizens Against Busing” campaign organised two days of boycotts, temporarily withdrawing tens of thousands of white pupils from the city’s schools.²⁵³ Nonetheless, in September 1972 some thirteen thousand pupils in Memphis were transported from their homes to schools in other neighbourhoods as the *Swann* ruling was implemented in Memphis for the first time.

The main reason for the fierce resistance to the *Swann* ruling was, of course, that it threatened to realise the kind of meaningful integration that had eluded most school systems ever since *Brown*. In the seventeen years since 1954, the apologists of segregation had successfully managed to prevent, block and resist—via all manner of means—the numerous integration initiatives from achieving their intended outcomes. Moreover, in comparison with other public facilities such as parks, the stakes were set uniquely high for the issue of school integration: preserving or establishing de facto-white schools in neighbourhoods with little or no black presence was in essence about protecting the privileges white communities had enjoyed throughout the Jim Crow era—i.e., superior facilities, higher quality education, and exclusive access to better housing. As one anti-busing campaigner from Charlotte, North Carolina argued, “So many of us made the biggest investment of our lives—our homes—primarily on the basis of their location with regard to schools. It seems like an absurdity that anyone could tell us where to send our children”.²⁵⁴ For its opponents, busing thus represented a belligerent governmental intrusion into the gains earned by a hard working “Silent Majority”.²⁵⁵

Like the white community’s initial response to *Brown*, there was no violence in the immediate aftermath of *Swann* in Memphis.²⁵⁶ Instead, once it finally became clear that busing was an inevitability, many white communities simply stepped-up their withdrawal from majority-black inner-city areas of the city. *Swann*, in other words, led to an acceleration of the phenomenon known as “white flight” in cities across the nation. This was particularly the case in Memphis and its surrounding suburbs. By the beginning of the second full school year of busing, for which a district judge ordered the transportation of almost forty thousand students (more than double the amount from the year before), over twenty thousand white pupils permanently ‘abandoned the city school system’ in favour of private or public schools in the suburbs, where only a tiny minority of African Americans resided.²⁵⁷ As a result, there was a rapid reduction in the proportion of white pupils studying at public schools in the inner-city areas of Memphis. In the space of just nine months between January and September 1973, the percentage of white students in the Memphis public school system dropped from 42% to 32%. Predictably, there was a parallel increase in private school enrolment. And between autumn 1972 and May 1973 the number of private schools in Memphis rose from 64 to 90.²⁵⁸ Such was the extent of white withdrawal from the inner-city that Shelby County, the district encompassing Memphis and its suburbs and where the majority of relocating whites moved

²⁵³ Ibid, p. 292.

²⁵⁴ Don Roberson, quoted in Lassiter, *The Silent Majority*, p. 1 – 2.

²⁵⁵ See *ibid*.

²⁵⁶ Roger Biles, “A Bittersweet Victory: Public School Desegregation in Memphis”, *The Journal of Negro Education*, Vol. 55, No. 4 (1986), pp. 470 – 483, p. 479.

²⁵⁷ Kiel, “Exploded Dream”, p. 295.

²⁵⁸ Biles, “A Bittersweet Victory”, p. 479.

to, struggled to build enough schools to cope with the demand.²⁵⁹ The widely cited and often celebrated lack of race-related violence in Memphis in the wake of the *Swann* ruling thus concealed the extent to which white flight in the city was preventing the implementation of an integrated school system. As legal scholar Roger Biles has noted, 'the absence of violence and the relative ease with which modest change occurred gave Memphis the undeserved reputation of a city that effectively handled the mandate for desegregation'.²⁶⁰ As one observer has commented, however, the way Memphis dealt with busing in actual fact led to a 'disastrous desegregation saga' in the city.²⁶¹

The responses of the white communities of Memphis—including citizens, activists, politicians and churches—to busing had long lasting effects on the prospect of future racial integration in the city. Most visibly, the mass exodus of whites from the inner-city to suburban districts resulted in a continuation of de facto segregation in the majority of Memphis's schools and neighbourhoods. This lasted long after the initial phase of busing. In 1979, eight years after *Swann*, a study by the US Department for Health, Education and Welfare ranked Memphis the 'fifty-third least desegregated' public school system out of a total of six thousand; and in 1981 blacks constituted a considerable '76 percent of the [public] system's' enrolment.²⁶² The private, suburban Shelby County schools, meanwhile, 'provide a near-mirror image' of these figures.²⁶³ In 1990 there were over thirteen times as many whites as blacks in private schools—a rate which was 'nearly twice as high as the second most segregated private school system' in the country.²⁶⁴ Patterns of residential segregation mirrored the situation in the city's schools. Although far from being exclusive to Memphis, the River City's patterns of school and residential segregation were particularly acute in comparison with the rest of the country, and have showed little signs of subsiding, even sixty years after *Brown*. The lack of integration in Memphis throughout the second half of the twentieth century and beyond has led one observer to conclude that the 'promise of *Brown*, an end to separate and unequal education, seems to have evaded Memphis entirely'.²⁶⁵

Unsurprisingly, white churches in Memphis's suburbs benefited from the influx of new residents who were withdrawing from the city's public school system. Many white suburbanites joined churches in the same neighbourhoods as their new homes and their children's new schools. But some suburban congregations played a more active role in facilitating white flight than merely welcoming new members to their pews. From the early-1970s onwards, a number of white Protestant churches in Memphis, including Baptist and Presbyterian congregations, began to buy and run old private academies (though Bellevue itself was never affiliated with a school). Although the ostensible purpose of these new faith schools was to provide a "Christian alternative" to the secular city schools, they effectively catered for the new generation of white suburbanites who could not afford the fees of the

²⁵⁹ Kiel, "Exploded Dream", p. 295

²⁶⁰ Biles, "A Bittersweet Victory", p. 483.

²⁶¹ Lassiter, *The Silent Majority*, p. 295.

²⁶² Biles, "A Bittersweet Victory", p. 483.

²⁶³ Kiel, "Exploded Dream", p. 297.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid*, p. 298.

²⁶⁵ Kiel, "Exploded Dream", p. 297.

more expensive, established and elite prep schools.²⁶⁶ One of the most prominent of these was the Southern Baptist Educational Center (SBEC), established in 1972 and situated in the Southaven suburb of Memphis. Thanks to the extremity of white flight in the city, schools like the SBEC 'continued to thrive in Memphis as in no place else,' and 'quickly became an institutionalized part of the Memphis schooling scene'.²⁶⁷ Some pastor-headmasters denied that the emergence of church-affiliated private schools had anything to do with inner-city integration measures or busing.²⁶⁸ Others, however, were more sceptical. One administrator of suburban faith school In Memphis stated in 1973 that "It seems mighty strange that Christian education only became important enough during the time of school busing for these schools to be formed".²⁶⁹ Whatever the true reasons for white Protestant churches' greater involvement in education, such schools undoubtedly facilitated white abandonment of the public school system, and ipso facto the geographical withdrawal of white communities from the inner-city; without churches running these schools there would have been less space for parents to enrol their children in the private schools system. The new members gained through white flight, as well as the additional funding received by running fee-paying private schools, resulted in widespread growth for white suburban churches in Memphis.

As one would expect, white flight had the opposite effect on many inner-city congregations. Indeed, the processes described above thrust many white congregations into crisis, as the demographic composition of their surrounding environments began to change dramatically. The manner in which churches responded to such demographic transformation became the crucial variable on which their survival depended. In order to avoid declining, congregations were forced to choose between either adapting to demographic change, resisting it, or relocating to more demographically suitable neighbourhoods.²⁷⁰ For churches like Highland Park Baptist Church (HPBC) in Detroit, the subject of Darren Dochuk's study on the suburbanisation of fundamentalism, this latter choice became a reality.²⁷¹ The Highland Park district of the city experienced an alarming 18 percent drop in population between 1950 and 1960, and by 1970 it had been transformed from a majority-white to a predominantly black neighbourhood.²⁷² Because the congregation was 'ill equipped' to adapt to or resist the economic and social changes which were 'overtaking the community', HPBC went into decline, before completing its move in the late 1960s.²⁷³ The story of HPBC was in many ways typical of the plight of white congregations all over the nation: desegregation and the abolition of discriminatory housing allocation practices led to an influx of African Americans into formerly all-white neighbourhoods; meanwhile, racism, massive resistance and busing led to an acceleration of white withdrawal during the late sixties and seventies; white congregations then mimicked the suburbanisation of the majority of their members. Desegregation, busing

²⁶⁶ Biles, "A Bittersweet Victory", p. 479.

²⁶⁷ Kiel, "Exploded Dream", p. 298.

²⁶⁸ Biles, "A Bittersweet Victory", p. 479.

²⁶⁹ *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, August 23, 1973. Quoted in Ibid, p. 481.

²⁷⁰ Dochuk, "'Praying for a Wicked City'", p. 174. These three terms first appear in Nancy T. Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, (USA: Rutgers University Press, 1996), pp. 43 – 5.

²⁷¹ Dochuk, "'Praying for a Wicked City'", p. 174.

²⁷² Ibid.

²⁷³ Ibid, p. 176.

and white flight were thus intimately linked to the fates of white congregations in cities like Memphis.

“Becoming Suburban”: The Effects of Bellevue’s Connections with Memphis’s Suburbs

Situated on North Bellevue Boulevard in Midtown, just two and a half miles from the centre of Downtown, Bellevue Baptist Church was one of the many white inner-city churches to be affected by the wave of demographic change that swept Memphis in the 1970s. But Bellevue was, unlike other white inner-city congregations, to a large extent protected from the challenges associated with residing in a racially diverse neighbourhood. This was thanks to its status as the largest and most famous church in the city, as well as its renewed growth during the beginning of the Rogers pastorate. Consequently, Bellevue did not complete its own relocation to the suburbs until relatively late, in 1989 (the subject of this thesis’s final chapter). Nonetheless, Bellevue’s medium-term rootedness in Midtown did not stop it from being affected by the demographic and socioeconomic changes that were taking place in the city during the 1970s. On the contrary, Bellevue’s presence throughout the 1970s in the heart of Midtown betrayed the extent to which the congregation was being transformed by white flight and the creation of the political, cultural and economic entity of Memphis’s suburbs. Alongside the allure of Rogers, Bellevue’s status as a megachurch was perhaps the main reason why it was able to continue to attract whites even as they were moving in their droves out of the inner-city to the suburbs. While smaller congregations usually attract attendees from a very limited geographical area, megachurches are able to draw people from a far broader catchment of neighbourhoods and districts. By the end of the 1970s, Bellevue had long since evolved from being a “neighbourhood church” into a “regional church”. Its location in Midtown therefore did not present Bellevue with the same immediate problems as smaller congregations, since it was able to attract people to worship even while they were living in relatively remote areas. Ultimately, this ability to appeal to a new generation of white suburbanites, even while the congregation resided in the inner-city, became the driving force behind a shift in the congregational culture of the church. Therefore, whereas other white congregations displayed their relationships with demographic flux in the most physically obvious of ways—i.e., by relocating to the suburbs—the changes wrought upon Bellevue during the first ten years of busing related instead to the impact of outside forces on what was happening within the church’s pews.

As already demonstrated, the rejuvenation of Bellevue’s growth during the beginning of the Rogers pastorate entailed attracting a broader cross-section of whites while maintaining the church’s *laissez-faire* approach towards ethnic minorities. Unsurprisingly, Bellevue’s continued reliance on attracting whites during the acceleration of white flight resulted in increasingly strong connections with the suburbs. But these connections were about more than the shifting geographical locations of the church’s congregants; Bellevue’s suburban connections were also about the influence upon the church of the socioeconomic and even political features of the suburbs, which were transforming rapidly thanks to the development of the Sunbelt. The following paragraphs show that as Bellevue’s ties with the suburbs strengthened, its congregational culture started to reflect to a greater extent the middle-class,

relatively young constitution of the city's eastern fringes. In other words, over a decade and a half before its actual relocation, Bellevue was starting to become progressively more "suburban" during the early 1970s. This shift in the congregational culture helped preserve the church's de facto racial segregation and lay the foundations for a conservative political culture at Bellevue (as discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4) and other churches like it which fostered the evangelical movement's subsequent alignment with the Republican Party.

By refraining from racially diversifying its membership during the acceleration of white flight in Memphis, the proportion of Bellevue's congregants who were living in the suburbs inevitably increased. Although there is no record of precisely when individual members of the church moved, or exactly where it was they moved to, the scale of white flight in Memphis between 1970 and 1980 all but eradicates the possibility that Bellevue—as the largest white congregation in the whole city—was unaffected by mass white suburbanisation. The changing socioeconomic characteristics of Memphis's suburbs during the 1970s provide a clue about the nature of their influence on Bellevue during the first ten years of Rogers' pastorate. Statistics reveal how neighbourhoods on the eastern edges of the city's perimeter rapidly became bastions of white, middle class affluence. Prior to the 1970s, Memphis's suburbs were surprisingly mixed (albeit sparsely populated), with a proportionally high number of African American and low-income residents. But the racial and class composition of suburban neighbourhoods was rapidly transformed by the wave of post-busing demographic change.

A typical example of these effects was the Germantown Parkway area, which is located thirteen miles east of Downtown, and encompasses the Cordova neighbourhood, where Bellevue would eventually move to in 1989. Between 1970 and 1980 Germantown's population soared from 3,474 to 21,467 residents—an increase of over 600%.²⁷⁴ This compares to a net population increase of just 3.7% for Memphis and 7.6% for Shelby County.²⁷⁵ Moreover, in contrast to the city and county, whose population increases were both the result of a net growth in the African American population, Germantown's population increase can be explained solely by white suburbanisation, since during the same decade the district went from being 67% to 90% white.²⁷⁶ Meanwhile, Memphis and Shelby County's net decrease in the white population was due to whites moving to neighbouring, less metropolitan counties such as Fayette and Tipton.²⁷⁷ As a result, although the overall proportion of whites living in

²⁷⁴ United States Census Bureau, "Census of Population and Housing: Decennial Censuses", accessed May 13, 2015, <http://www.census.gov/prod/www/decennial.html#y1980popv1tn>.

²⁷⁵ United States Census Bureau, "Census of Population and Housing: Decennial Censuses"; Richard L. Forstall (ed.), "Population of Counties by Decennial Census: 1900 to 1990", United States Census Bureau, accessed May 13, 2015, <http://www.census.gov/population/cencounts/tn190090.txt>.

²⁷⁶ Memphis and Shelby County Office of Planning and Development, "Germantown Parkway Area Study: Background Report", p. v. BBT - Germantown Parkway Area folder, DMCF.

²⁷⁷ Between 1970 and 1980, the net population of whites in Shelby County decreased by 8.1%, while the population of non-white residents increased by 4.1%. Meanwhile, the opposite was the case in more rural counties to the east of Shelby County. In Fayette County, Tennessee, the population of whites increased by 30%, while the number of non-white residents decreased by almost 20%. Data retrieved from Richelle Winkler, Kenneth M. Johnson, Cheng Cheng, Jim Beaudoin, Paul R. Voss, and Katherine J. Curtis, "Net Migration Patterns for US Counties", Applied Population Laboratory, University of Wisconsin- Madison, 2013. Accessed May 13, 2015, <http://www.netmigration.wisc.edu>.

the whole of Shelby County actually decreased during the 1970s, certain neighbourhoods like Germantown were subjected to dramatic increases in the *concentration* of white residents. In other words, the white families that chose not to withdraw from Memphis and Shelby County during the 1970s were increasingly likely to reside in suburban locations like Germantown and Bellevue's future neighbourhood, Cordova. The surge in white suburbanisation in Memphis post-*Swann* thus led to a racial homogenisation of the city's suburbs which was almost as extreme as Bellevue's own racial homogeneity. During the 1970s there were also clear changes to the average age configuration of the neighbourhood. People between the ages of 18 and 34 went from constituting 22% of the population in 1970 to 39% in 1980.²⁷⁸ Meanwhile, Germantown also underwent a transformation in the average socioeconomic profile of its residents. The proportion of people with four or more years of college education rose sharply from 8% to 26%, while the median household income for the area rose from around \$9,000 in 1969 to over \$22,000 in 1979, an increase which comfortably outpaced the rate of inflation.²⁷⁹ Taken as a whole these figures hint at how, as the 1970s progressed, Memphis's two-tier educational, residential and socioeconomic system—split, as always, along racial lines—became increasingly entrenched. As the population of the city's eastern suburbs burgeoned, districts like Germantown became strongholds of white, middle class prosperity.

These processes were, of course, facilitated by the extreme patterns of white flight in the city. But the social and racial homogenisation of districts like Germantown was also rooted in the broader, structural forces of economics and government policy in the 1970s South. To begin with, Memphis was one of a large handful of southern cities which were affected, albeit to varying degrees, by the phenomenon known as the "Sunbelt Boom". In the 1970s various town planners, politicians and businesses initiated a series of 'development strategies' aimed at sucking economic resources from the traditional industrial heartlands of the Northeast and Midwest and rapidly industrialising the South.²⁸⁰ Aided by the federal government, which had been awarding prestigious manufacturing contracts to southern companies ever since the 1950s, the Sunbelt region quickly became synonymous with high-tech industries such as defence, aerospace and electronics.²⁸¹ Overall, the Sunbelt boom succeeded in bringing skilled jobs and net economic growth to a region which, even at the tail end of the 1960s, had been

²⁷⁸ Memphis and Shelby County Office of Planning and Development, "Germantown Parkway Area Study".

²⁷⁹ Ibid.

²⁸⁰ Wanda Rushing, "Memphis: Cotton Fields, Cargo Planes, and Biotechnology", *Southern Spaces*, 28 August 2009, accessed March 30, 2015, <http://southernspaces.org/2009/memphis-cotton-fields-cargo-planes-and-biotechnology>.

²⁸¹ The defence industry is usually considered to have been the jewel in the crown of the Sunbelt boom. By the beginning of the 1970s the defence industry had become the single largest employer in four southern states, with seven of the nation's top ten defence contractors 'operat[ing] large installations in the South'. See Bruce J. Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal Economic Policy, Economic Development, and the Transformation of the South, 1938 – 1980*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 142. For other studies of the Sunbelt phenomenon, see Carl Abbott, *The New Urban America: Growth and Politics in Sunbelt Cities*, (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press: 1987); Raymond A. Mohl (ed.), *Searching for the Sunbelt: Historical Perspectives on a Region*, (Georgia: University of Georgia Press: 1993); Michelle Nickerson and Darren Dochuk (eds.), *Sunbelt Rising: The Politics of Space, Place and Region*, (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

lagging far behind its regional competitors in terms of industrial development. Population figures are perhaps the best illustration of the economic appeal of the region during the Sunbelt boom. During the first half of the 1970s the Sunbelt had what has been described as an “incredible explosion” in North to South interstate migration, as the region’s population grew by 2.6 million.²⁸² In a dramatic and rapid reversal of the Great Migration of the first seventy years of the twentieth century, the South had become one of the United States’ ‘dominant growth region[s]’. While the population of the country as a whole increased by 11% between 1970 and 1980, many congressional districts in Sunbelt states such as California, Texas and Florida more than doubled in population.²⁸³ Indeed, by the end of the Sunbelt’s population boom, the region had become the ‘demographic centre gravity’ of the whole country.²⁸⁴ But the benefits of the South’s economic boom—i.e. high-skilled jobs, wealth creation and superior housing and schooling—were distributed unevenly, with the lion’s share of resources filtering through to suburban areas, thereby accentuating the socioeconomic discrepancies between black and white districts of southern cities. This was reflected in the racial characteristics of the Sunbelt’s population explosion. Although there were also significant increases in the population of Latin American and Asian immigrants, the majority of the Sunbelt’s new settlers were, like in Germantown itself, white, college educated and conservative.²⁸⁵ Interstate migration during the 1970s therefore helped accentuate a process that white flight in Memphis had already set in motion: the greater concentration of wealthy, middle class, conservative whites in suburban locations like Germantown.

Memphis never quite acquired the same level of industrial growth that other southern cities such as Houston and Atlanta had achieved during the height of the Sunbelt Boom.²⁸⁶ Whereas some of its regional neighbours had been transformed by huge, federally-subsidised investment initiatives, the River City’s gains were relatively modest in comparison; the main sectors of growth were the city’s professional sports promotion sector, agricultural equipment trade and, thanks to the often-celebrated decision by FedEx to open its new global headquarters at Memphis International Airport, the distribution industries.²⁸⁷ But one characteristic that Memphis did share with its fellow Sunbelt cities was its method of attracting investment. That is, its growth model consisted of creating a fertile “business climate” for the private sector, whereby city officials would use the typically-southern

²⁸² Abbott, *The New Urban America*, p. 8.

²⁸³ United States Census Bureau, “1980 Census of Population”, accessed April 4, 2014, <https://archive.org/stream/1980censusofpopu00unit#page/n15/mode/2up>.

²⁸⁴ Matthew Hunt et al, “Who is Headed South? U.S. Migration Trends in Black and White, 1970 – 2000”, in *Social Forces*, pp. 96 – 119, accessed April 4, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20430851>.

²⁸⁵ As historian Richard Scher has explained, ‘in-migration to the South since World War Two has been heavily white and middle class...[and] many brought their Republican attitudes with them...as they came from the North and Midwest’. Richard Scher, *Politics in the New South: Republicanism, Race and Leadership in the Twentieth Century*, (M.E Sharpe; revised second edition: 1996), p. 169.

²⁸⁶ For an in-depth study of economic growth in Sunbelt cities, see Abbott, *The New Urban America*.

²⁸⁷ Memphis had long been an intercontinental hub linking the US South with distribution centres in North and South America, Europe and Asia; and the relocation, in 1973, from neighbouring Arkansas to Memphis of the globally-recognised distribution company FedEx was a major coup for the city. Nonetheless, in terms of sheer economic muscle, the growth of Memphis’s distribution industry could not match the higher-skilled and more prestigious trades found elsewhere in the Sunbelt.

features of low-wages, low union membership, and low corporate taxation to lure enterprises, businesses and federal funding to the city.²⁸⁸ It was these city council members who ‘in the metropolitan Sunbelt represented concrete moneyed interests’, and who had ‘principle leverage over the allocation of federal funds’ for a city’s infrastructure, urban renewal and transportation.²⁸⁹ Up to a point, this strategy achieved its intention of attracting private sector investment to Memphis, creating jobs and economic growth, and in turn ‘enhanc[ing] the city’s comparative advantages’.²⁹⁰ But these initiatives also helped perpetuate Memphis’s dependence on low wage labour, and even contributed to worsening poverty levels. Most notably, the symptoms of business strategy disproportionately affected the city’s black population which, thanks to the processes described above, was already far more likely to have access to lower quality schooling and housing than whites. As argued by historian of Memphis Wanda Rushing, the city’s successive attempts at industrial development therefore often had the effect of ‘reproduc[ing] old patterns of inequality’ rather than reversing them.²⁹¹

The construction of Memphis’s “business climate” thus accentuated the city’s two-tier educational, residential, and socioeconomic system which was split clearly along race and class lines and whose border was the frontier between suburbs and inner-city. Indeed, by the end of the 1970s Memphis was a city made up of two ‘economic and social landscapes, suburban sprawl and affluence outside the I-240 [interstate] expressway ring and urban poverty within’.²⁹² Furthermore, the bipolar residential system was actively protected by the city’s white political elites, who had a vested interest in preserving white affluence in the suburbs. Historian Matthew Lassiter argues that Memphis was one of several archetypal examples of southern cities which funnelled disproportionate sums of ‘power and resources’ to what he refers to as “island suburbs” — ‘a cluster of upper-middle class and wealthy white neighbourhoods located inside the city limits and protected by exclusionary zoning policies from racial integration and socioeconomic diversity’.²⁹³ Furthermore, throughout the 1970s and beyond, numerous ‘city-friendly annexation laws’ were passed which enabled Memphis to unite multiple eastern Shelby County districts with the rest of the city and in turn incorporate up to 150,000 new residents from predominantly white neighbourhoods.²⁹⁴ In Memphis and elsewhere, this was part of a bid by city authorities to ‘minimize the impact of white out-migration from areas experiencing black residential expansion, and therefore maintain elite control of municipal politics’. The attempts made by city authorities to hang on to white power and economic privilege was, concludes Lassiter, nothing less than an

²⁸⁸ Elizabeth Shermer’s study of Sunbelt city Phoenix, Arizona demonstrates how the city’s business elite and officials created this “business climate” by manipulating politics and federal funding to ‘disenfranchis[e] voters, weaken unions, repeal regulations, and shift the tax burden onto homeowners and consumers’. Elizabeth Tandy Shermer, *Sunbelt Capitalism: Phoenix and the Transformation of American Politics*, (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

²⁸⁹ Lassiter, *The Silent Majority*, p. 12.

²⁹⁰ Rushing, “Cotton Fields”.

²⁹¹ Ibid.

²⁹² Wanda Rushing, *Memphis and the Paradox of Place: Globalisation and the American South*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), p. 4.

²⁹³ Lassiter, *The Silent Majority*, p. 13.

²⁹⁴ Ibid, p. 13.

‘apartheid agenda’.²⁹⁵ By shifting the field’s focus from white flight to government policy, Lassiter’s study represents a timely attempt to understand the structural forces that contributed towards post-busing residential segregation and socioeconomic inequality in southern cities. Lassiter correctly notes that ‘the white flight thesis’ often ‘obscures the constellation of government policies that drove postwar suburbanisation, excising structural analysis in favour of a narrative that revolves around individual racism’.²⁹⁶ In reality, decisions that were made at both a federal and City Hall level contributed at least as much to the two-tier racial and economic system in Memphis as white flight did.

For the purposes of this thesis, however, it is the effects, rather than the causes, of post-busing residential segregation that are of most interest. As demonstrated by Lassiter, the most important symptom of the creation of racially and socially homogenous “island suburbs” was the formation of a powerful grassroots political force which helped prompt the ‘emergence of a centre-right dynamic that has dominated American politics since the 1960s’.²⁹⁷ In a process which was aided by interstate migration to the South during the 1970s, which was disproportionately white and Republican, residents of suburbs like Germantown increasingly become proponents of a racially conservative ‘discourse of suburban innocence that depicted residential segregation as the class-based outcome of meritocratic individualism rather than the unconstitutional product of structural racism’.²⁹⁸ Although a minority of such residents were involved in political campaigns, it was ‘suburban homeowners who were neither committed activists nor conservative ideologues’ who represented the most ‘crucial demographic that came to drive the electoral strategies of both parties’.²⁹⁹ The term employed to describe such a group—the “Silent Majority”—was embraced by the suburban residents themselves and used by Richard Nixon as part of his strategy of using racially coded language to indirectly promise to preserve white middle class privilege during the era of colour-blindness.

It was in this atmosphere of racial, socioeconomic, and political polarisation in Memphis that Bellevue’s growth during the first ten years of the Rogers pastorate was taking place. The almost uniformly white nature of Bellevue’s post-Pollard revival, combined with the increasing concentration of whites residing in the suburbs, meant it was always likely that the church would be affected by the transformations that were taking place in the suburbs. But Bellevue’s connections with the suburbs were about more than chance; the specific features of the congregation, combined with the church’s racially uniform growth strategy, had the effect of strengthening the church’s ties with white suburbanisation. Bellevue was in many ways the ideal cultural and theological (although prior to its relocation, by no means geographical) environment for the new generation of white suburbanites who had migrated from the inner-city and from the Rustbelt cities of the Northeast and Midwest. Not only did Bellevue’s culture of strict conservatism appeal to white middle class worshippers, but the church’s theological inerrantism—which, as discussed earlier, emphasised individual

²⁹⁵ Ibid, p. 297.

²⁹⁶ Ibid, p. 9.

²⁹⁷ Ibid, p. 3.

²⁹⁸ Ibid, p. 1. For a study demonstrating the disproportionately conservative and Republican orientations of Sunbelt in-migrants, see, Scher, *Politics in the New South*.

²⁹⁹ Lassiter, *The Silent Majority*, p. 8.

explanations for social problems—was a natural bedfellow for the Silent Majority’s colour-blind ideology. These features contributed towards the appeal that Bellevue had towards white suburbanites, and relate to the reasons why “strict” churches were growing.

The tilt towards younger, more educated, and wealthier residents in places like Germantown was indeed reflected in the type of audience Bellevue was beginning to attract during the first ten years of the post-Pollard revival. Chapter 1 referred to a 1950 study of Bellevue by *The Christian Century*, which described the church’s congregants as ‘8,000 of the common people’ of Memphis.³⁰⁰ But as part of the transformation of the church’s congregation which would begin from around 1972, much of Bellevue would become wealthier and more middle class in later years—a pattern which reflected the nationwide trend of upward social mobility that was taking place amongst Southern Baptists from the 1980s onwards.³⁰¹ In 1993, one Bellevue member described the change in the class composition of the church that had taken place over the last two decades: “lots of [Bellevue members] came to this town with mud on their shoes and became reasonably prosperous”.³⁰² Meanwhile, a journalist writing in the 1990s described Bellevue’s contemporary congregation as made up of ‘middle-income, small business types and first generation suburbanites’.³⁰³ Although the difference between the class makeup of the congregation in 1950 and 1980 was not necessarily extreme, it hints at a widening of appeal which was necessary for the church’s post-Pollard revival, and is reflective of the developments which were taking place in white Memphian communities after *Swann*.

From the very beginning young, middle class families became Rogers’ most important target audience, and would duly become one of the church’s core constituencies of the post-Pollard era.³⁰⁴ Rogers’ daughter Janice Ediston has recalled how the Bellevue pastor “attracted many young families. There is no doubt about that”.³⁰⁵ This was part of how, from the beginning of the church’s revival under Rogers, Bellevue’s congregational culture started to increasingly resemble the socioeconomic features of Memphis’s suburbs. Bellevue’s congregational suburbanisation therefore began two decades before the church’s actual

³⁰⁰ “Great Churches of America”, p. 490.

³⁰¹ A report by sociologists of contemporary American religion Christian Smith and Robert Faris demonstrates that the percentage of Southern Baptists with a college degree rose from ten percent in 1983 to sixteen percent in 1998. Meanwhile, the average household income and mean occupational prestige rose by similar levels, although the denomination still lagged far behind other Christian denominations in terms of social class indicators. Christian Smith and Robert Faris, “Socioeconomic Inequality in the American Religious System: An Update and Assessment”, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (2005), pp. 95 – 104, p. 98, accessed April 18, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3590521>.

³⁰² Balmer, “Churchgoing: Bellevue Baptist Church near Memphis”, p. 487.

³⁰³ Ibid.

³⁰⁴ Rogers’ strategy of attracting a younger, more middle class constituency reflected trends that were taking place in megachurches across the country. Karnes et al’s survey of megachurch growth patterns shows that most large congregations resided in wealthier neighbourhoods and attracted a younger, more middle class audience than the average American churchgoer. Kimberly Karnes, Wayne McIntosh, Irwin L. Morris and Shanna Pearson-Merkowitz, “Mighty Fortresses: Explaining the Spatial Distribution of American Megachurches,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (2007), pp. 262 – 268, accessed April 10, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4621973>.

³⁰⁵ Ediston, interview with author.

relocation. As Chapter 4's direct analysis of Bellevue's congregational culture during the 1980s will show, these linkages with the suburbs would have important political ramifications. Years before any kind of partisan political pronouncements were being made by the Christian Right's leaders, a process was underway in churches like Bellevue which was helping to forge conservative evangelicalism's alliances with the Republican Party. This process had little to do with direct, overt forms of mobilisation, but was instead about the creation of a conservative political culture which facilitated engagement with Republican Party politics during the 1980s.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the developments at Bellevue during what was, for both the church and the city that it resided in, a decade of significant change. To begin with, in 1972 Rogers became only the third pastor to be inaugurated at Bellevue in the last forty-five years of the church's history. He soon attracted new members at a rate that had not been seen at the church since the height of the Lee pastorate in the 1950s. This was thanks to his exceptional pastoral and preaching skills, as well as his keenness to attract younger worshippers from a broader socioeconomic (though not racial) spectrum. This chapter has also demonstrated that Bellevue's growth was also intimately linked to the general growth trends of Protestantism during the 1970s. As a charismatic, strictly-inerrantist pastor, Rogers fulfilled the criterion of spiritual "seriousness" that was of crucial importance for white conservatives in the post-civil rights religious landscape. Meanwhile, Rogers' strong commitment to evangelism emphasised the religious "purity" of Bellevue at a time when alternative religious agendas such as social gospel were growing increasingly out of favour amongst white Protestants. Although SBC congregations which adhered to this framework would, as the demographic constitution of urban counties like Shelby changed, suffer from their lack of appeal towards racial minorities, during the 1970s it enabled them to take an unprecedented amount of worshippers from mainline denominations.

The second half of this chapter discussed the demographic, socioeconomic and political changes that took place in Memphis, and their effects on the congregational culture of Bellevue. The first instances of busing in Memphis in 1972 triggered particularly extreme levels of "white flight", effectively sealing the city's status as one of the most racially polarised and segregated urban environments in the whole country. This was evident most of all in the racial composition of Memphis's schools and neighbourhoods—not to mention the city's churches. Post-civil rights white flight was further accentuated by deliberate attempts made by Memphis's white political elite and even the federal government to protect residential segregation and white prosperity in the suburbs. Lastly, the political economy of the Sunbelt helped exacerbate the two-tier residential, educational and socioeconomic system in Memphis. As ground-breaking studies on the creation of the Silent Majority show, the dramatically increased concentration of affluent and middle-class whites in suburbs like Germantown helped create a conservative political culture which embraced colour-blind explanations for racial inequality and suburban privilege.

The case study of Bellevue demonstrates that the socioeconomic, demographic and religious transformations that took place in the 1970s were, in this southern, urban context, connected to one another in important but unexamined ways. Although the notion that Bellevue's conservatism and theological strictness helped the church to grow comes as little surprise, the socioeconomic and even political implications of this growth have up until now been little understood. This chapter has demonstrated that rather than being separate, unrelated phenomena, the post-1960s growth of white evangelicalism was, in cases like Bellevue, connected to the creation of racially and socioeconomically homogenous suburban neighbourhoods. Since a core component of Bellevue's post-Pollard revival was attracting young, middle-class whites—the vast majority of whom were, by the end of the 1970s, residing in the suburbs—the church's connections with the socioeconomic and political entity of the "island suburbs" increased. These links were strengthened thanks to the continuation of Bellevue's *laissez-faire* approach towards attracting minorities and by the church's theology, which naturally complemented colour-blind approaches towards inequality like those that could be found in Memphis's suburbs. Bellevue's links with these socioeconomic and political features resulted in a congregational culture which was becoming increasingly "suburbanised".

Chapter 3: Adrian Rogers and Ed McAteer's Role in the Mobilisation of SBC Conservatives

In June 1979 Adrian Rogers became the third pastor in Bellevue's history to be nominated as president of the Southern Baptist Convention, following Robert Lee from 1949 to 1951 and Ramsey Pollard in 1960. The significance of Rogers' nomination, however, far exceeded that of his predecessors' circumstances. Rogers was the first president to be elected as part of the Conservative Resurgence, a battle waged on ostensibly theological grounds to wipe out all traces of liberal and moderate impulses from the denomination. Rather than attempt to add to the considerable work written about the causes of the Conservative Resurgence, this chapter focusses narrowly on the roles of Rogers and Bellevue layman Ed McAteer between 1979 and 1982, with a view to understanding how this related to Bellevue. Around the same time as the beginning of Rogers' involvement with denominational politics, the former business executive McAteer embarked on his own career in political advocacy, and thanks to his ability to bring together people from different corners of the evangelical movement, was able to forge an alliance between the SBC, the Christian Right and the Republican Party. The majority of this chapter focusses on Rogers' and McAteer's joint efforts to use the issue of school prayer to bring these three branches of conservatism closer to one another, as part of the campaign to increase the influence of evangelicalism over the GOP. It is argued that school prayer was prioritised by SBC conservatives like Rogers and McAteer for two reasons: firstly, the current constitutional status of school prayer was seen as evidence that the federal government had become increasingly hostile towards religion. Campaigning to remove constitutional restrictions on prayer in public schools was thus part of a broader initiative by SBC conservatives to encourage the government to accommodate Christianity in the public sphere to a greater degree. Secondly, since it was in many ways an archetypal church-state issue, school prayer could be used as an instrument in the conservatives' battle with SBC moderates and liberals. By the early 1980s, conservatives had a far less strict approach towards church-state separation than moderates and liberals, who were strongly opposed to any derestriction of the constitutional status of school prayer. If conservatives could defeat moderates and liberals on one of the issues they cared most about, their control over the denomination's entire organisational bureaucracy could be confirmed.

This chapter's analysis of Rogers' and McAteer's denominational and political activity is, of course, carried out with a view to understanding how this activity related to Bellevue. Chapter 4 discusses the existence of a new conservative political culture at Bellevue during the 1980s, but the final section of this chapter shows that Rogers sought to keep his denominational and ministerial duties separate. Although, as subsequent paragraphs outline, Rogers and McAteer played important roles in forging an alliance between the conservative evangelical movement and the Republican Party, both figures were hesitant about making partisan pronouncements from Bellevue's pulpit. This reluctance existed in similar forms at other leading conservative megachurches, such as at Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia, where Christian Right leader Jerry Falwell exhibited a similar tendency. Given the high degree of loyalty that conservative evangelicals exhibited towards the Republican Party ever since the 1980 election, this phenomenon is surprising; but it has nonetheless received little attention in the historiography of contemporary evangelicalism,

which has often assumed that conservative evangelical churches became sites of more overt, direct forms of partisan mobilisation. It suggested here that the main reason for this reluctance is that pastors like Rogers did not want partisan political matters to dilute or interfere with their ministerial duties. Even during the height of his denominational activity, Rogers insisted that his main priority was preaching at Bellevue. Moreover, laypeople who knew Rogers at the time have also suggested that Rogers' wanted to minimise the overlap between his denominational and ministerial duties. All of this is consistent with this thesis's contention that rather than being created intentionally, the political culture found at conservative evangelical churches like Bellevue during the Christian Right era was primarily the product of indirect forces.

Background to the Conservative Resurgence

Perhaps Ed McAteer's most important achievement was his role in turning the 12.5 million member SBC into a strong political ally of the Christian Right. By the 1982 SBC convention in New Orleans, the denomination had effectively dropped its nonpartisan pretences. Following the denomination's approval of Reagan's proposals to overturn the *Roe Vs. Wade* abortion ruling and reject the Equal Rights Amendment, at the 1982 convention the SBC officially endorsed the Republican Party's plan to reintroduce school prayer. Symbolising the newfound intimacy between the Christian Right, the SBC and the GOP, that year's meeting was brought to a close with a speech by Vice President George H. W. Bush, who held that "The famous wall of separation between church and state is there to keep the state from interfering with the churches, not to keep the churches or individual religious leaders or ordinary church members from participating in our politics".³⁰⁶ But without the denomination's notorious Conservative Resurgence of 1979, the allegiance between these three powerful branches of contemporary conservatism would not have been possible. The following paragraphs contextualise Rogers' and McAteer's involvement with the SBC's transformation and politicisation by briefly describing the various causes of the Conservative Resurgence.

Up until the beginning of the Resurgence the SBC had been, for the majority of the twentieth century, a relatively diverse denomination led by a broad coalition of centrists and moderates who were 'positioned in the middle of the Southern Baptist theological spectrum'.³⁰⁷ There had always been dissenting voices on both the left and right, but prior to 1979 neither side had had much 'representation on boards of denominational agencies or on the faculties of the six seminaries'.³⁰⁸ An implicit agreement referred to by scholars such as Bill Leonard as the "Grand Compromise" was what helped gel the denomination together and avoid conflict between the different factions. This entailed Southern Baptists from all theological orientations implicitly agreeing that the 'Convention would resist all attempts to define basic doctrines in ways that excluded one tradition or another, thereby destroying

³⁰⁶ George H. W. Bush, quoted in Williams, *God's Own Party*, p. 202.

³⁰⁷ Ibid, p. 3.

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

unity and undermining the missionary imperative'.³⁰⁹ In 1979 this long-standing agreement between Southern Baptists of all persuasions would come to an end when a determined group of inerrantist conservatives declared war on the denomination's moderates. Convinced that the denomination had become too liberal, SBC conservatives were afraid that 'by allowing latitude in matters of theology, it was going the way of other mainline denominations' by moving away from an evangelistic, orthodox version of the faith.³¹⁰ Moreover, unlike their more liberal coreligionists, conservatives wanted the SBC to adhere to the confessionalism strand of denominational governance, which holds that no theological diversity should exist within a single communion. Armed with these convictions and a dogged determination, SBC conservatives then set off on their campaign to spread their brand of theology to all corners of the denomination, and to wipe out moderate and liberal impulses from all positions of influence.

Beyond the conservatives' ostensible theological grounds for orchestrating their rebellion, what other factors led to the Resurgence? In other words, why did conservatives mobilise in 1979, over a hundred and thirty years after the denomination's formation? Although not every scholar working on the history of the controversy has paid the period due attention, its origins can be traced back as far as the civil rights era, when Baptists at opposite ends of the denomination's conservative-liberal divide clashed over how Protestantism generally and the SBC specifically was to respond to America's "race problem".³¹¹ Before that time the Grand Compromise had ensured that the hostilities between the denomination's competing factions were kept under control. But race was one issue which Baptist conservatives, most of whom were openly segregationist, were willing to jeopardise the Compromise over. Thus, many conservatives reacted to moderates' relatively progressive positions during the civil rights movement with furious resistance. Liberal and conservative approaches towards race and segregation were in part symptomatic of theological differences between the two camps. Whereas progressives favoured collective responses to social problems such as racism, most conservatives were biblical inerrantists who argued Baptists should concentrate on soul winning, and assumed that inequalities were the result of individual responsibility rather than structural forces. But these different approaches towards social ministry had always existed in the denomination; in reality, then, it was the threat to the racial order posed by liberal Baptists and the civil rights movement which undermined the Grand Compromise. As Carolyn Dupont has argued, 'only in response to progressive attempts to engineer a far-reaching and meaningful response to America's racial crisis...did [the] disparities' between liberals and conservatives of the SBC begin to 'appear insufferable'.³¹²

Despite the vigour with which many conservatives had defended the racial status quo during the earliest stages of the Resurgence, segregationist Baptists were inevitably forced to

³⁰⁹ Bill Leonard, *God's Last and Only Hope: The Fragmentation of the Southern Baptist Convention* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1990), p. 38.

³¹⁰ Hankins, *Uneasy in Babylon*, p. 4.

³¹¹ One of the few studies to consider the role of race and segregation debates in the 1960s on the Conservative Resurgence is Dupont, *Mississippi Praying*, pp. 201 – 212. See also Rosenberg, *The Southern Baptists*.

³¹² Dupont, *Mississippi Praying*, p. 202.

concede that they were on the wrong side of history. By the beginning of the 1970s the whole of the denomination was ostensibly backing 'the trajectory towards racial inclusiveness'.³¹³ If they had not already done so, Southern Baptists of all theological and ideological persuasions were forced to adopt moderate positions with regard to race. But this did not mean that conservatives changed their stances on other social issues. On the contrary, though most conservative Baptists were 'willing to be progressive and in the cultural mainstream on this one topic', with all other issues they remained staunchly conservative.³¹⁴ The theological and ideological incompatibilities between the two factions thus continued to exist long after the civil rights movement. The conclusive defeat of racism and segregationism in the cultural mainstream of post-civil rights American society can help explain why conservatives waited until 1979 to wage a battle against their more liberal coreligionists. Irrespective of the true extent of racism in the SBC during the 1970s, by being on the losing side of the desegregation debate fundamentalism was in a less tenable cultural position than it had been during the decade before. Since fundamentalism had become strongly associated with racism (and the vast majority of overtly segregationist SBC congregations had indeed been fundamentalist and irreligious), conservative Southern Baptists had suffered a loss of credibility which reduced their legitimacy and in turn weakened their power within the denomination. Although this was not the only reason why SBC conservatives did not mobilise until 1979, the outcome of the civil rights movement gave moderates and liberals additional legitimacy going into the 1970s.

Another explanation for the somewhat belated post-civil rights remobilisation of Southern Baptist conservatives is that the cultural and industrial transformations that took place in the South during the 1970s—as discussed in the last chapter—were necessary preconditions for the Resurgence. The cultural convergence that had begun to take place between the Northeast and the South had led SBC conservatives to believe that 'the South was no longer immune to diversity, pluralism, and secularism', which had been defining features of northern culture for generations;³¹⁵ this notion provided a key motive for conservative Baptists' mobilisation, since fundamentalism by definition 'includes not only a distinctive set of orthodox religious beliefs but also a sense of being in opposition to key aspects of modern culture'.³¹⁶ In this context the Conservative Resurgence thus represented 'the first stage of mobilization' against the rapidly changing surrounding culture that southern fundamentalism had grown to be in conflict with:³¹⁷ in other words, by taking control of the whole of their denomination, SBC conservatives would be able to wage war with their cultural and political enemies in the most effective way possible. The South's sudden pluralisation meant that although the region 'remained religiously distinctive, Baptists...could no longer

³¹³ Hankins, *Uneasy in Babylon*, p. 243.

³¹⁴ Ibid. It was not until 1979 that SBC conservatives acted with unity around the abortion issue, however. As the Introduction to this dissertation has already discussed, Baptists such as W. A. Criswell had defended the *Roe* Supreme Court ruling as late as 1973.

³¹⁵ Ibid, p. 2.

³¹⁶ D. Paul Johnson, "Confronting Conservative Complexity among Southern Baptist Fundamentalists", *Review of Religious Research*, Vol. 50 (October 2008), pp. 66 – 68, p. 66-7.

³¹⁷ Hankins, *Uneasy in Babylon*, p. 2.

claim an unchallenged place at the centre of southern culture'.³¹⁸ But rather than gradually chip away at orthodox religiosity in the region, this exposure to modernism and pluralism in the South actually resulted in an *increase* in 'support for both the denominational and national conservative agendas'.³¹⁹ This was because fundamentalism tapped into anxieties felt by conservative southerners about not just the sudden onset of cultural pluralism in the South, but also, at a broader historical and geographical level, towards 'the disturbing revolutionary decisions of the Supreme Court under Chief Justice Earl Warren and to the excesses of student protesters...during the Vietnam War'.³²⁰

Seen in this context, the Resurgence was a political response to what SBC conservatives believed to be a 'cultural crisis that necessitated a warlike struggle against the forces that were hostile to evangelical faith'.³²¹ Prior to the civil rights movement—while the SBC's place 'at the centre of southern culture' remained unchallenged—the Grand Compromise was strong enough to keep the denomination's left and right factions from periodically waging civil wars against one another.³²² But as demonstrated by some conservatives' responses *Brown* and desegregation, significant threats to distinctively southern ways of life were liable to disturb the balance of the Compromise. Once the 'denominational machinery' was in their hands, conservatives planned to 'fight and win' the culture war and re-establish the denomination's authority in the South.³²³ Rather than merely being about theology, then, the impetus behind the Resurgence lay in driving 'moderates from positions of influence' so that conservatives could 'create a new and very different posture diametrically opposed to the dominant institutions of American culture'.³²⁴ SBC conservatives' enemies were precisely the same as those of the trans-denominational (albeit predominantly evangelical) Christian Right, which explains why the post-Resurgence SBC represented an ideal political ally to the latter group.

Adrian Rogers has been described as one of the three principle "architects" of the Conservative Resurgence, along with biblical scholar Paige Patterson and appeals court judge Paul Pressler.³²⁵ According to this interpretation Patterson functioned as the movement's theologian, Pressler as the 'organizing tactician', and Rogers served as the popular and charismatic pastor.³²⁶ Rogers was initially reluctant to consider nominating himself for the role of SBC president. He had always thought of himself a devoted pastor, and did not envisage a denominational position as part of his career plans. But he was nonetheless extremely concerned about the liberal direction that he and his fellow conservatives had perceived the denomination to be taking. At one point shortly before the decision was made to run for SBC

³¹⁸ Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Baptist Battles: Social Change and Religious Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention*, (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1990), p. 55.

³¹⁹ Nancy Tatom Ammerman, "Southern Baptists and the New Christian Right", *Review of Religious Research*, Vol. 50 (October 2008), pp. 69 – 91, p. 69.

³²⁰ David Morgan, *The New Crusades, the New Holy Land: Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention*, (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1996), p. 46.

³²¹ Hankins, *Uneasy in Babylon*, p. 10.

³²² Ammerman, *Baptist Battles*, p. 55.

³²³ Hankins, *Uneasy in Babylon*, p. 10.

³²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 274.

³²⁵ Hankins, *Uneasy in Babylon*, p. 6.

³²⁶ Walter B. Shurden and Randy Shepley, (eds.), *Going for the Jugular: A Documentary History of the SBC Holy War*, (Macon, GA.: Mercer University Press, 1996), p. xii, in *ibid*.

president, Rogers was so disturbed by the growth of liberalism in the SBC that he even considered withdrawing his church from the denomination entirely.³²⁷ For numerous reasons, this would have been an extremely controversial procedure; for a congregation the size of Bellevue to withdraw would have sent shockwaves through the whole of the SBC, and possibly even have caused severe instability within the denomination. Moreover, it was difficult to gauge how much of a congregational mandate Rogers would have had to withdraw his church from the denomination. Rogers' daughter Janice Ediston recalls how her father had said to his wife at the time, "I think they [the congregation] will go [out of the SBC] with me, but maybe not".³²⁸

Eventually, Rogers decided that rather than take the drastic step of withdrawing his church, he would pursue the more ambitious option of helping to overhaul the denomination from within. Despite his reluctance, his friends Patterson and Pressler had been able to convince Rogers that he was their man to help "turn the ship around".³²⁹ Sometime in between when Rogers was considering withdrawing Bellevue from the SBC and when he formally submitted his nomination in the spring of 1979, the three architects of the Resurgence "came up with a plan [where] they were able to appoint people on committees, and they were able to get the presidents they wanted as heads of seminaries".³³⁰ The conservative strategy for the 1979 convention meeting in Houston, Texas was to get Rogers elected on an inerrantist ticket, and part of this entailed campaigning to get as many conservatives and fundamentalists to attend the meeting as possible. Prior to the 1979 election staunchly-conservative presidential candidates were rare, but this time 'conservatives had a clear choice' among the candidates.³³¹ Moreover, the architects of the Resurgence had been able to 'rally their troops to stand behind Rogers'.³³² On a June afternoon in Houston in 1979, the Bellevue pastor won with fifty-one percent of the vote, demonstrating that almost half of those in attendance favoured a less conservative direction for the denomination. Nonetheless, Rogers' share of the vote was enough to ensure he was elected as president of the Convention, and for the SBC conservatives to begin to implement their plans to transform the denomination.

Rogers, McAteer, and School Prayer: Uniting the SBC and the Christian Right

During the mobilisation of SBC conservatives and the Christian Right, Adrian Rogers and Bellevue's most politically active layman, Ed McAteer, shared a common cause: to promote the reversal of the 1962 *Engel Vs. Vitale* Supreme Court decision, which ruled that government-authorised school prayer represented "religious establishment" and was therefore unconstitutional.³³³ School prayer was, of course, not the only issue that SBC conservatives like Rogers and McAteer were involved with during the height of their denominational and political influence. Neither was it the case that school prayer was the single issue which

³²⁷ Ediston, interview with author.

³²⁸ Ibid.

³²⁹ Ibid.

³³⁰ Ibid.

³³¹ Hankins, *Uneasy in Babylon*, p. 6.

³³² Ibid.

³³³ Although the same ruling did permit voluntary school prayer.

motivated conservatives to adopt accommodationist stances with regards to church-state separation.³³⁴ However, although abortion was by 1979 the moral priority for almost all SBC conservatives, as the following paragraphs show, Rogers and McAteer saw unique opportunity in the school prayer initiative. This section argues that the reasons for Rogers' and McAteer's crusade to derestrict school prayer laws were twofold: firstly, *Engel Vs. Vitale* was seen as evidence for the increasing hostility of the federal government towards religion, and the growing secularisation of American society. Although the *Engel* case had taken place a full seventeen years prior to the beginning of Rogers' and McAteer's battle, it was only once the Conservative Resurgence was fully underway that SBC conservatives could resist such measures in a unified way. Although Rogers, McAteer, and other SBC conservatives never advocated an outright dissolution of the separation between church and state, they did want the American government to adopt a "friendlier", accommodationist stance towards religion, as opposed to what they saw as the aggressively secularist approach of recent Supreme Court decisions. The school prayer issue therefore represented a key battlefield in SBC conservatives' war against "secular humanism".³³⁵

More importantly, school prayer represented one of the final frontiers of the conservatives' campaign to wipe out the presence of moderates and achieve full control of the SBC. This was because unlike other evangelical "social issues", school prayer was in many ways a quintessential church-state issue. Liberals and moderates of the SBC tended to have far stricter approaches towards church-state separation than conservatives; they therefore resisted the school prayer initiative with greater tenacity than they had with other issues such as abortion and the Equal Rights Amendment. As late as 1980, much to the disdain of conservatives, moderates had actually managed to pass an official resolution at the SBC which disapproved of any attempt to undermine the Supreme Court's earlier ruling forbidding government sponsorship of school prayer.³³⁶ Therefore, if SBC conservatives could push through a reversal of the SBC's endorsement of the *Engel Vs. Vitale* ruling—thereby defeating moderates and liberals on one of the issues they cared most about—then it would be clear that from then onwards conservatives would be able to exercise full control over the denomination's organisational apparatus. Events following the 1982 SBC convention, when conservatives finally succeeded in establishing a pro-school prayer position in the denomination, appeared to vindicate this inkling, since moderates' influence would continue to dwindle throughout the 1980s and beyond, and future resolutions would reflect the accommodationist direction that conservatives favoured. Once SBC conservatives had achieved their ambition of taking over their denomination, they were able to forge an alliance

³³⁴ Andrew Lewis's ground-breaking study of the evolution of the SBC's church-state positions since the late 1970s argues that the issue of abortion was actually the root cause of conservatives' shift from separationism to accommodationism. Andrew R. Lewis, "Abortion Politics and the Decline of the Separation of Church and State: The Southern Baptist Case", *Politics and Religion*, No. 7 (2014), accessed May 27, 2016, DOI 10.1017/S1755048314000492.

³³⁵ Daniel Williams has shown that fears surrounding "secular humanism"—the label the Christian Right used to refer to what they perceived to be the hostile forces of secular society working to eradicate religion—were a central reason for build-up of political mobilised evangelicalism in the late 1970s. Williams, *God's Own Party*.

³³⁶ Hankins, *Uneasy in Babylon*, p. 146.

between the denomination and the Christian Right, a process which McAteer was largely responsible for.

SBC conservatives' mobilisation in part originated from their suspicion that the traditional method of protecting religious freedoms, i.e. by erecting a "wall of separation" between church and state, was no longer valid, since the surrounding culture—not to mention the three branches of the federal government—had become so hostile towards the liberties and principles of the Baptist faith. Conservatives' solution to this problem was to adopt an "accommodationist" stance. As opposed to moderates, who still insisted on the strict separation of church and state, accommodationism 'holds...that government should take a friendly stance towards religion, accommodating it wherever possible'.³³⁷ This had particular pertinence with regard to the school prayer debates. Prior to the Resurgence, conservatives had generally stayed faithful to the official SBC position that school prayer should fall under the legal jurisdiction of the First Amendment's Establishment Clause. As interpreted in the *Engel v. Vitale* ruling, the contemporary use of the Clause considered school prayer in public schools to be an example of the government helping "establish" religious practice, hence the custom was considered unlawful. However, while the Resurgence was taking place conservatives had started to argue that school prayer was not an Establishment-related issue but rather a free-speech or free-exercise concern. In other words, conservatives now suggested that tolerating religion in public schools was a matter of freedom of expression rather than of government promoting or "establishing" religion. This subtle but significant shift enabled conservatives to argue for both the separation of church and state and simultaneously a greater involvement in politics.

Despite conservatives' protestations to the contrary, many moderates and liberals saw the shift towards accommodationism as a violation of the denomination's longstanding endorsement of church-state separation. One of these figures was Foy Valentine, who was one of the denomination's most prominent liberals and who presided over the Christian Life Commission (CLC) between 1960 and 1987. The CLC was the SBC's public policy division, and had in recent decades garnered a reputation for being one of the denomination's most liberal agencies. For example, as head of the CLC during the civil rights movement, Valentine had angered many segregationist Baptists with his progressive approach towards racial equality. And as a theological moderate Valentine also, throughout the Conservative Resurgence, occupied a position 'on the front edge of resistance to the fundamentalist movement'.³³⁸ Valentine's liberalism meant he was strongly against any attempts to bring the denomination closer to the three branches of the federal government. But as noted by a former colleague of Valentine's, Robert Parham, the CLC's liberal stances made the agency "an early takeover target" for Rogers.³³⁹ Although Valentine survived in his role as CLC director until 1987, the agency eventually succumbed to the conservative takeover and in turn became what Parham refers to as "an arm of the religious right".³⁴⁰

³³⁷ Hankins, *Uneasy in Babylon*, p. 140.

³³⁸ John Rutledge, "Foy Valentine prodded Baptists to apply faith to life", *The Baptist Standard*, January 20, 2006, accessed June 10, 2015, <https://www.baptiststandard.com/resources/archives/46-2006-archives/4581-foy-valentine-prodded-baptists-to-apply-faith-to-life>.

³³⁹ Robert Parham, quoted in Rutledge, "Foy Valentine".

³⁴⁰ Ibid.

Meanwhile, years before Valentine's removal from the agency, in 1979 Rogers oversaw the formation of the Christian Citizenship Corps (CCC), a subdivision of the CLC. The CCC was formed with the explicit purpose of 'generat[ing] increased political involvement among the SBC's 13.2 million members'.³⁴¹ Although spokesmen for the CCC were coy about the extent of its political ambitions, it was clear that the organisation was a SBC conservative, accommodationist brainchild. In an interview with a Tennessee Baptist press William H. Elder, a CLC staff member, said the CCC was set up as a "grassroots network of Southern Baptists" which would be "interested in what government is doing locally, statewide and nationally, and willing to make their voices heard in those areas".³⁴² Elder claimed that rather than being explicitly politically-biased like, for example, Christian Right groups such as the Moral Majority, the CCC merely functioned to "coordinate and facilitate communication" between members and government, in the hope of raising awareness of "legislative issues and their ethical implications".³⁴³ He insisted that the organisation "recognizes and defends the doctrine of separation of church and state".³⁴⁴ But the Corps was nonetheless the first instance of an SBC organisation being established 'to mobilize political action through an organized structure'.³⁴⁵

While working behind the scenes to help establish groups like the CCC, Rogers promoted the accommodationist cause through his personal school prayer campaign. In January 1980, Rogers joined the Coalition for the First Amendment (CFA), an accommodationist lobby group comprised mainly of SBC conservatives, and which included amongst its endeavours the school prayer initiative. The establishment of the Coalition corresponded to similar efforts made by Southern Baptist Senator Jessie Helms, who brought the crusade directly to the halls of Congress. Other high-profile members included Paige Patterson and future president of the SBC Charles Stanley, both of whom shared Rogers' theological stances and were instrumental players in the Conservative Resurgence. But as the incumbent SBC president Rogers was the most high-profile member of the Coalition, and his decision to join was met with a furious backlash from moderates, who argued he was undermining the SBC's commitment to church-state separation. Rogers' main reason for joining the Coalition was that he believed "we have become almost anti-God and humanistic in our approach to some of our school systems because of the misapplication of the Supreme Court rulings".³⁴⁶ Federal judgements had become too extreme, he argued, because they had too often interpreted the First Amendment as if it had *banned* voluntary prayer in public schools. By attempting to make schools as religiously neutral as possible, Rogers maintained, the Supreme Court had inadvertently helped prevent or at least discourage the free exercise of religion in schools. The solution, Rogers and his cohort of accommodationist Baptists argued, was to allow each state to decide how to apply the First Amendment ruling in schools.

³⁴¹ "Southern Baptist 'Christian Citizenship Corps' Launched", *Baptist and Reflector*, Vol. 145, No. 35, August 29, 1979, p. 1, Serials in Archives, Serials, SBHLA.

³⁴² William H. Elder, quoted in *ibid.*

³⁴³ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

³⁴⁵ "Southern Baptist 'Christian Citizenship Corps' Launched", p. 2.

³⁴⁶ Adrian Rogers, quoted in Stan Hastey, "Rogers joins crusade to bar courts from interfering in school prayers", *Baptist and Reflector*, January 30, 1980, p. 3, Serials in Archives, Serials, SBHLA.

This would enable “judges closer to and more responsible to us” to rule, and to eradicate the possibility of any extreme federal misapplications.³⁴⁷ “I think we’ve gotten some grotesque interpretations of First Amendment,” Rogers concluded, and his solution was necessary to “bring the corrections needed”.³⁴⁸

While embarking on his public crusade to remove school prayer from the jurisdiction of the Supreme Court, Rogers insisted that his stances did not in any way contradict the traditional SBC commitment to church-state separation. “I want to reiterate that I am diametrically opposed to state dictated or enforced religion,” Rogers asserted in an interview conducted shortly after he joined the Coalition.³⁴⁹ But despite Rogers’ efforts to downplay his membership, in many quarters of the Baptist establishment his actions were seen as a potentially dangerous assault on the principle of church-state separation. For example, in an article for the Kentucky Publication the *Western Recorder*, C. R. Daley said Rogers was entitled to his personal opinions about church-state separation, ‘even if they are out of line with the historic and present Southern Baptist position on’ the issue.³⁵⁰ But he believed that the Coalition potentially sought to undermine the Supreme Court rulings separating church and state, which the SBC had officially endorsed in special resolutions in 1964 and 1971. Moreover, ‘the truth is he is convention president and whatever he says or does reflects upon the convention’.³⁵¹ Therefore, Daley concluded, ‘lend[ing] his name and the Southern Baptist presidency to this movement’ was an irresponsible move, since it risked jeopardising ‘what is probably the most important contribution of Baptists in American life’.³⁵² An article in another publication argued Rogers’ suggestions jeopardised the rights of religious minorities, and that this was ironic, given that the ‘Baptist faith was born in 17th-century England, where there was an official religion and it wasn’t Baptist’.³⁵³ But ‘now that the Southern Baptist denomination is large and powerful,’ the article concluded, ‘some of its leaders put less value on the rights of religious minorities’.³⁵⁴ Meanwhile, other portions of the Baptist press did praise Rogers’ stances. One newspaper argued ‘his reasons are worth considering’, and that Rogers was right to resist ‘the business of shutting God out from society’ that he saw was taking place in recent years.³⁵⁵

Perhaps the most articulate resistance to Rogers’ church-state stances came from James E. Wood, Jr, who was executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs (BJC) from 1972 to 1980. The BJC was a Washington-based association promoting religious liberty and church-state separation, representing numerous American Baptist denominations, including the SBC. The Conservative Resurgence marked the beginning of a prickly relationship between the SBC and the BJC, which culminated in 1991 with the SBC

³⁴⁷ Adrian Rogers, quoted in James Lee Young, “Wood, Rogers debate school prayer issue”, *Baptist and Reflector*, February 27, 1980, p. 2, Serials in Archives, Serials, SBHLA.

³⁴⁸ Ibid.

³⁴⁹ Ibid.

³⁵⁰ C. R. Daley, “The action of President Rogers is disappointing”, *Western Recorder*, February 13, 1980, Serials in Archives, Serials, SBHLA.

³⁵¹ Ibid.

³⁵² Ibid.

³⁵³ “School Prayer: A Baptist Leader Misleads”, *The Charlotte Observer*, February 12, 1980, p. 1.

³⁵⁴ Ibid.

³⁵⁵ “Editorial: Rogers is right”, *Rocky Mountain Baptist*.

withdrawing its funding for the organisation, due to widening gap between the two organisations' stances on key moral issues.³⁵⁶ Known for its strict separationism, the BJC disapproved of the accommodationist direction that the SBC had been taking since 1979. Meanwhile, SBC conservatives lamented the relative liberalism of the BJC, with Paige Patterson telling *Christianity Today* in 1984 that the association's representatives were "hobnob[ing] with the liberal establishment in the House and Senate".³⁵⁷ The disagreement between Wood and Rogers over the latter's involvement with the Coalition was the first instance of conflict between the SBC and the BJC that took place publically. A furious Wood told the *Baptist and Reflector* he was "dismayed" and "disappointed" at Rogers' campaign.³⁵⁸ Going a step further than C. R. Daley of the *Western Recorder*, Wood argued Rogers had "completely repudiated the official resolutions of the Southern Baptist Convention" by joining the Coalition.³⁵⁹ "Rogers did not consult with anyone on our staff about the serious First Amendment questions raised by the position of the new coalition," he continued.³⁶⁰ In a blistering conclusion, Wood argued that the Coalition's position "in fact runs precisely contrary to that taken repeatedly through the years by the Southern Baptist Convention, the Baptist Joint Committee, and its other member bodies".³⁶¹

Rogers and Wood expressed their disagreements over the school prayer issue publically in February 1980, when the two confronted one another after a speech the president made to the SBC's Executive Committee. Rogers' address was not intended to be about school prayer, but he concluded it with some "personal comments", 'which included a statement on his much publicized stance' on the issue.³⁶² After the speech was over, Wood went over to the stage floor and greeted Rogers. The pair addressed one another respectfully, shaking hands 'amiably' before 'engaging in dialogue over their differences'.³⁶³ Rogers claimed that people were wrong to believe that his stance was against the SBC resolutions. He said 'he would never "knowingly go against the will of our great denomination"', before reiterating his belief that federal rulings had become more anti-God and humanistic in their approach towards religion in schools.³⁶⁴ Wood countered that the Supreme Court already catered for voluntary prayer in public schools, and that the struggles of Senator Jessie Helms and the CFA were "dangerous".³⁶⁵ Wood then articulated his three primary objections to removing voluntary prayer from the jurisdiction of the federal courts, which were that the measure would lead to

³⁵⁶ Although there were other issues at stake, key conservative Baptist Paige Patterson claimed abortion was by far the most important reason for the SBC's withdrawal of the BJC's funding. 'Although the BJC took no official position on the issue, knowing that the executive director, James Dunn [Wood's successor], disagreed with conservatives on abortion was enough for right wingers' to know they could no longer work with the association'. Hankins, *Uneasy in Babylon*, p. 44.

³⁵⁷ Paige Patterson, quoted in Beth Spring, "James Dunn is the Focus of a Southern Baptist Controversy", *Christianity Today*, March 16, 1984, p. 44, SBC Controversy Collection – chronological file – 1984, AR 812, Box 1, SBHLA.

³⁵⁸ James E. Wood, Jr, quoted in Hastey, "Rogers joins crusade to bar courts", p. 3.

³⁵⁹ Ibid.

³⁶⁰ Ibid.

³⁶¹ Ibid.

³⁶² Young, "Wood, Rogers debate school prayer issue", p. 2.

³⁶³ Ibid.

³⁶⁴ Adrian Rogers, quoted in Young, "Wood, Rogers debate school prayer issue", p. 2.

³⁶⁵ James E. Wood, Jr., quoted in Young, "Wood, Rogers debate school prayer issue", p. 2.

attempts to amend the Constitution without 'referring to the states for their approval'; that it could also 'set a precedent...for the destruction of First Amendment freedoms'; and that the procedure could lead to a 'hodgepodge of approaches to the issue of prayer'.³⁶⁶ In response Rogers then outlined his rationale for supporting state authority over the issue, arguing "federal judges are not always without error," and that "we...have a vital concern that the Supreme Court may misrule".³⁶⁷ He also maintained that this system would not lead to states 'forcing religion in schools', which was a scenario Wood argued was in fact very much possible.³⁶⁸ At the end of the encounter Rogers and Wood 'verbally expressed love for one another,' with Rogers saying he did not call the BJC before joining the Coalition because he "felt...[he] was not controverting the decision of the SBC".³⁶⁹ "We have different positions for the same reasons," he said.³⁷⁰

In the middle of May 1980, Rogers unexpectedly announced that he would not be standing for re-election at the upcoming SBC presidential elections, which were scheduled to be held around a month later in St. Louis, Missouri. His decision would have taken many by surprise, since as incumbent he was constitutionally entitled to run for a consecutive presidential term. Instead, Rogers became only the fourth president in SBC history to decline to stand for re-election.³⁷¹ Rogers said the main reason for his decision was the challenges ahead at Bellevue.³⁷² "Our church is in a period of growth unprecedented in its history," Rogers stated in an interview with the *Baptist and Reflector*.³⁷³ "These are days, therefore, that I want to maximize for my church".³⁷⁴ The first half of the 1980s was indeed an exceptionally busy period for Bellevue, as the church struggled to cope with the dramatic membership increases and began to make plans for a new building programme (culminating on the church's decision to relocate). Rogers also expressed a desire to spend more time with his family, and said he began to consider his future while he was recovering from a gall bladder operation in Memphis the preceding February. But as he had always insisted was the case, church duties were his overriding priority: "As much as I love my denomination, my church is still my first responsibility".³⁷⁵

While Rogers was withdrawing from the denominational scene, there was another associate of Bellevue whose career in political advocacy was beginning to launch, and who would have an equally important role to play in promoting the accommodationist cause. In 1980, native Memphian and lifelong Bellevue layman Ed McAteer was becoming one of the conservative evangelical movement's most influential figures. A skilful and wealthy networker who was endowed with the 'skills of persuasion that he needed to market New Right ideology', perhaps McAteer's greatest achievement was to facilitate a strong alliance

³⁶⁶ Young, "Wood, Rogers debate school prayer issue", p. 2.

³⁶⁷ Adrian Rogers, quoted in Young, "Wood, Rogers debate school prayer issue", p. 2.

³⁶⁸ Young, "Wood, Rogers debate school prayer issue", p. 2.

³⁶⁹ Ibid; Rogers, quoted in *ibid*.

³⁷⁰ Ibid.

³⁷¹ Robert O'Brian, "Rogers declines second presidential term", *Baptist and Reflector*, May 14, 1980, p. 1, Serials in Archives, Serials, SBHLA.

³⁷² Adrian Rogers, quoted O'Brian, "Rogers declines", p. 9.

³⁷³ Ibid.

³⁷⁴ Ibid.

³⁷⁵ Ibid.

between the SBC, the Christian Right and the Republican Party, so that by 1982 the three organisations were working together closely to promote evangelical-friendly legislation.³⁷⁶ Born in 1926, McAteer's mother died when he was four years old and his father was rarely present, so he was raised 'a virtual orphan' by other family members.³⁷⁷ It was these foster parents—along with his wife Faye Carter, whom he married in 1948—who 'instilled in him [a] strong...religious devotion'.³⁷⁸ As a young man McAteer served in World War Two as a Merchant Marine, before getting a job in the advertising department of the Colgate-Palmolive Company. McAteer soon proved to be a gifted salesman, and 'within four months [he had] received his first promotion'.³⁷⁹ He went on to devote twenty-five years of his life to Colgate-Palmolive, rising through the ranks to become an executive at the company. But according to one commentator, in the late-1970s, when McAteer was in his early fifties, 'something [started] gnawing away at him'.³⁸⁰ McAteer's firmly entrenched conservative Baptists beliefs were the root cause of the profound discontent he had begun to feel about what he saw as the 'growing secularization of the country and a feeling of time-honoured traditions being overturned'.³⁸¹ His grievances were essentially the same as those aired by Rogers, Patterson, and others working to increase the influence of SBC conservatism—namely, the perceived increase in the influence of "secular humanism", and the perception that the federal government was undermining their Baptist principles. In 1979, the same year Rogers became president of the SBC, McAteer decided the time was right to quit his high-earning executive position at Colgate and devote himself fully to his campaign to increase the influence of conservative evangelicalism.

Had he been a clergyman rather than a layman at Bellevue, McAteer might have been tempted to pursue his agenda via a denominational route, like the pastor of his church had already done. However, although McAteer lacked the credentials to be able to seek a denominational position alongside Rogers, this did not hinder his ability to contribute towards the SBC conservative cause. In fact, as a rich and well-connected layman McAteer was able to act with a degree of independence which most denominational officials were not able to exercise. Advocacy was McAteer's preferred instrument for influencing the political system, and it was through this mechanism that he left his most lasting legacies. In 1979, McAteer played a crucial role in convincing his preacher and televangelist friend Jerry Falwell to help mobilise evangelicals, despite the fundamentalist pastor's reservations about entering politics.³⁸² The Bellevue member helped Falwell establish the Moral Majority, one of the New Christian Right's most well-known and influential independent organisations.³⁸³ But McAteer was not content with merely helping his friend establish an advocacy group; he had ambitions of his own to run such an organisation, and in September of the same year he launched the

³⁷⁶ Williams, *God's Own Party*, p. 174.

³⁷⁷ Daniel E. Johnson, "The Ed McAteer Story", *Memphis Jewish Journal*, August 2005, p. 20.

³⁷⁸ Ibid.

³⁷⁹ Ibid.

³⁸⁰ Ibid.

³⁸¹ Ibid.

³⁸² See Williams, *God's Own Party*, pp. 171 – 179.

³⁸³ Tom Lindberg, in "Religious-Right pioneer Ed McAteer dead at 78", *Baptist News Global*, October 6, 2004, accessed July 14, 2015, <https://baptistnews.com/archives/item/1325-religious-right-pioneer-ed-mcateer-dead-at-78>.

Religious Roundtable in a conference room in Washington, DC. There was obvious symbolism attached to his decision to arrange the organisation's first meeting in the epicentre of America's political world. Like the Moral Majority, the Religious Roundtable sought to 'rally fundamentalists to politically conservative causes', and to maximise the influence of conservative evangelicalism on federal legislation.³⁸⁴ The organisation's tasks were made easier by the fact that it was being ran by a wealthy former business executive: alongside his job at Colgate, McAteer had spent half a lifetime acquiring powerful contacts from inside the SBC hierarchy. Thanks to these connections McAteer was able to appoint several high-profile conservative evangelicals to the board of directors of the Roundtable. These included future SBC president Charles Stanley, a pastor at a fundamentalist megachurch in Atlanta, televangelist star Pat Robertson, as well as his close ally Falwell.

In August 1980 the Roundtable hosted an event in Dallas which is often considered a watershed moment in the history of the Christian Right's journey towards gaining mainstream political influence. The National Affairs Briefing (NAB) was a 'two-day gathering of politically conservative evangelicals' which attracted a total of twenty thousand people, including five thousand pastors, four hundred journalists, and over one hundred media organisations.³⁸⁵ The keynote speaker at the event was Republican presidential nominee Ronald Reagan, who, after years of disappointments during the Carter administration, conservative evangelical leaders had already identified as the right person to lead their cause. Recognising the untapped political potential of mobilised conservative evangelicals on the eve of the 1980 election, Reagan made a speech at the Briefing that enthusiastically embraced his hosts' struggles. "I know this a non-partisan gathering, and so I know you can't endorse me," the former Governor of California stated. "But I want you to know that I endorse you and what you are doing".³⁸⁶ Suggesting that he was sympathetic towards the accommodationist cause, Reagan argued that recent Supreme Court decisions had been hostile towards religion and sympathetic towards humanism: "Under the pretence of separation of church and state," he argued, "religious beliefs cannot be advocated in many of our public institutions. But atheism can".³⁸⁷ At the end of Reagan's speech the 'Reunion Arena erupted in cheers'.³⁸⁸ With one of the clear frontrunners for the 1980 presidency endorsing several of the movement's staple stances, 'conservative evangelicals could hardly believe their good fortune'.³⁸⁹ Although the Briefing was ostensibly a nonpartisan gathering, soon after the event conservative evangelicals 'abandon[ed] their pretence of nonpartisanship [and] became enthusiastic champions of the Republican ticket'.³⁹⁰

The success of the Roundtable and McAteer's career in political advocacy were stunted somewhat by events surrounding the NAB. The first damaging event took place during the Briefing itself, when the newly-inaugurated SBC president Baily Smith made an anti-Semitic

³⁸⁴ Randall Balmer, *Encyclopedia of Evangelicalism*, "McAteer, Ed(ward)", (USA: Baylor University Press, 2004), p. 431.

³⁸⁵ Balmer, *Encyclopedia of Evangelicalism*, "National Affairs Briefing", p. 400.

³⁸⁶ Ronald Reagan, Address to the Roundtable National Affairs Briefing, Dallas, TX, August 22, 1980.

³⁸⁷ Ibid.

³⁸⁸ Balmer, "National Affairs Briefing", p. 400.

³⁸⁹ Williams, *God's Own Party*, p. 187.

³⁹⁰ Ibid.

remark. Reagan was forced to publically distance himself from the remark, and the Roundtable's reputation was tarnished. Pat Robertson was the most high-profile Baptist figure to quite the Roundtable as a result of the furore caused by the comments, and the organisation soon 'experienced a sharp decline in size and influence'.³⁹¹ Three months later, shortly after Reagan's landslide victory, McAteer was left disappointed by the new president's decision not to appoint "qualified Christians" to join his White House staff, despite assurances by Reagan during the NAB that he would consider McAteer and other evangelicals for top roles.³⁹² These disappointments were compounded by the first eighteen months of the Reagan administration, when concerns over employment figures and the economy comfortably overshadowed any willingness to engage with conservative evangelical issues. However, in the spring of 1982 hopes were boosted again by Reagan's decision—largely made thanks to pressure from McAteer and Falwell—to propose constitutional amendments to restore prayer in public schools and ban (or at least restrict) abortion.

McAteer saw the Reagan administration's school prayer bill as the ideal opportunity to finish what Rogers had started and push through an SBC endorsement of the proposed legislation. Since moderates within the denomination still strongly opposed state-sponsored school prayer, such a move would signify that conservatives had, once and for all, emerged victorious in their "Holy War". In turn, an endorsement of the school prayer initiative would enable the SBC to act in unison with the rest of the Christian Right. This was significant because, as recognised by McAteer, the largest Protestant denomination in the country had a potential influence that was far greater than lobby groups such as the Moral Majority and the Religious Roundtable.³⁹³ The Republican Party's relationship with evangelicals therefore to a large extent hinged on this conservative denomination of over thirteen million people. The 1982 SBC convention meeting in New Orleans had been scheduled to take place a couple of weeks after Reagan made his proposals, and McAteer saw this as his golden opportunity. A logistical problem prevented the meeting McAteer arranged between Rogers and Reagan at the White House—timed to coincide with the President's school prayer announcement—from taking place. But McAteer took no chances in New Orleans. He made sure 'that the resolutions committee' at the convention meeting 'was filled with school prayer supporters'.³⁹⁴ He also instructed his accommodationist pastors present at the convention to make speeches which tapped into anxieties many evangelicals had towards the creeping influence of "secular humanism". The resolution, McAteer and his allies argued, was about *protecting* religious liberty as opposed to restricting it. The current ban on state sponsored school prayer, they contended, played into the hands of secularists and atheists, who were openly hostile and intolerant of religion. What was needed was a constitutional amendment which took into account these hostile forces. McAteer's tactic was successful, and during the 1982 convention his resolution passed by a three-to-one majority. SBC conservatives' successes in 1982 have subsequently been seen as a seminal 'historical marker for the SBC,' since they were 'part of a

³⁹¹ Williams, *God's Own Party*, p. 190.

³⁹² Baily Smith used the phrase "qualified Christians" in a private meeting between Reagan and various evangelical elites during the NAB, when the SBC president and McAteer were trying to persuade Reagan to appoint them.

³⁹³ Williams, *God's Own Party*, p. 200.

³⁹⁴ Ibid.

monumental shift in the church-state position of the denomination'.³⁹⁵ Subsequent SBC resolutions would continue to reflect this position, until the denomination 'officially began lobbying for accommodation in 1991'.³⁹⁶ Conservatives had achieved an important victory over their liberal and moderate coreligionists, beating them over one of the issues which the latter group cared most about. This signalled to the whole denomination that conservatives now had complete control over the SBC's organisational bureaucracy.

Later, when the school prayer and abortion proposals were put to Congress in 1984, neither one was successful; the former failed to pass the Senate by eleven votes and a watered down abortion bill fell short by eighteen votes. Although the Reagan administration could perhaps have fought harder to convince Congress, the failure of both bills was in the end down to the general public's lack of interest endorsing the proposals.³⁹⁷ The proposals are, of course, evidence in themselves of the political power McAteer and other Christian Right leaders had managed to attain, but their ultimate failure is also indicative of how the movement's key figures tended to exaggerate the extent to which there was a public mandate for socially conservative legislation. This is applicable not just to abortion and school prayer, but also to subsequent failed attempts by the Christian Right and other conservative groups to block liberal legislation, such as the legalisation of marijuana in some states and the federal legalisation of same-sex marriage in 2015. As seen, even during what was one of the high points of the movement's influence, the ability of the Christian Right to translate its political power into a legislative reality was often limited.³⁹⁸ Nonetheless, the 1982 convention was in political terms highly significant for SBC conservatives, since it confirmed one of their important goals: the realisation of a lasting and intimate alliance between nation's largest Protestant denomination, the Christian Right and the GOP. This allegiance between evangelical and Republican elites was reflected in a similarly long-lasting electoral loyalty towards Republican presidential candidates by normal evangelical churchgoers.

Conclusion: The Conservative Resurgence, the Christian Right, and Bellevue

This chapter has discussed the involvement of Adrian Rogers and Ed McAteer in the SBC conservative movement, demonstrating how the two Bellevue colleagues used the issue of school prayer to consolidate conservative power within the denomination and form a strong political alliance between the SBC, the Christian Right and the Republican Party. But how did this three-year period of intense political and denominational activity by Bellevue's two most powerful figures relate to and influence the church itself? The answer to this question is in some ways surprising: Rogers, like pastors at other conservative evangelical churches, had a hesitancy towards bringing these ostensibly partisan political matters directly into their

³⁹⁵ Hankins, *Uneasy in Babylon*, p. 147-8.

³⁹⁶ Lewis, "Abortion Politics", p 522.

³⁹⁷ This is a point made by Williams, *God's Own Party*.

³⁹⁸ The schism between the New Right's and the Christian Right's political influence and their actual success at a legislative level is explored in detail by David Courtwright, who argues in his monograph that despite the prevalence of conservative politics in the post-civil rights era the majority of the movements' agendas were unfulfilled. David T. Courtwright, *No Right Turn: Conservative Politics in a Liberal America*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

churches. The historiography's lopsided interest in the Christian Right's elite-level mobilisation has left little space for discussing this issue, but if we are to fully understand conservative evangelicalism's post-1970s mobilisation it is surely necessary to attempt such an endeavour. After all, the vast majority of the SBC's thirteen-million members in 1980 were regular churchgoers, and did not have Rogers' and McAteer's political influence. But it was the behaviour of these churchgoers that ultimately constituted conservative evangelicalism's longstanding and disproportionately high loyalty towards the Republican Party from the 1980 election onwards.

Unlike the atmosphere of partisanship that could be felt at the 1982 SBC convention (as symbolised by the speech made by Vice President Bush at the end of the conference), there was a reluctance at Bellevue to translate the SBC's political inclinations into something similar within the churches pews. Indeed, Rogers often made deliberate attempts to put distance between his status as SBC president and his role as senior pastor of Bellevue. For example, when asked in an interview with a Baptist newspaper in 1980 about how his joining the CFA related to his ministerial duties, Rogers insisted "my involvement [in the Coalition] is as Adrian P. Rogers. Period. It's not as president of the Southern Baptist Convention or as pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church".³⁹⁹ "I see myself more as a prophet than a politician. I'm not a political creature," Rogers declared in another interview conducted in 1993.⁴⁰⁰ Similarly, Bellevue layman David Coombs, who was a friend of McAteer until the lobbyist died in 2004, has claimed that McAteer never spoke to the church from the pulpit about his political endeavours, but he did occasionally speak about such issues at his home.⁴⁰¹ Meanwhile, outside of Bellevue efforts to downplay the political ramifications of conservative evangelicalism during the era of the Christian Right were frequently made by elite members of the movement. Although Jerry Falwell declared in the early 1980s that he had "a divine mandate to go right to into the halls of Congress and fight for laws that will save America," 'as a minister, he did not want to appear too blatantly partisan'.⁴⁰² 'Like other fundamentalists and conservative evangelicals,' Christian Right expert Daniel K. Williams argues, Falwell 'thought that it was unseemly for a pastor to participate directly in a political campaign'.⁴⁰³ Even though it had always been obvious that Falwell was politically conservative, shortly before his lobbying career began in earnest the Lynchburg, Virginia-based pastor even went as far as saying he didn't "talk politics".⁴⁰⁴ Part of this conundrum admittedly relates to semantics. Falwell perhaps made these comments because he believed there was nothing "political" about his moral crusades against abortion and secularism. Nonetheless, it is a conundrum that is worth understanding in order to fully grasp conservative evangelicalism's engagement with the political domain during the late 1970s onwards.

³⁹⁹ Adrian Rogers, quoted in Hastey, "Rogers joins crusade", p. 3.

⁴⁰⁰ Adrian Rogers, quoted in Balmer, "Churchgoing: Bellevue Baptist Church near Memphis", p. 487.

⁴⁰¹ David Coombs, telephone interview with the author, August 11, 2015.

⁴⁰² Jerry Falwell, in William J. Peterson and Stephen Board, "Where is Jerry Falwell Going?", *Eternity*, July-August 1980, p. 19, quoted in Williams, *God's Own Party*, p. 177; Williams, *God's Own Party*, p. 173.

⁴⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

⁴⁰⁴ Jerry Falwell, quoted in Mary Murphy, "The Next Billy Graham," *Esquire*, October 10, 1978, p. 26. Quoted in Williams, *God's Own Party*, p. 173.

One explanation for this contradiction between the political activities of evangelical leaders on one hand and their unwillingness to bring partisan politics into the pulpit on the other is that Falwell et al did not want political matters to interfere with or dilute the purity of the evangelical message they were preaching in their churches. Rogers frequently insisted that preaching the Gospel and other ministerial tasks were always his main priority, even while he was serving as SBC president. Indeed, the main reason Rogers cited for why he declined to stand for re-election in 1980 was that the “pressing duties” at Bellevue would require his full attention.⁴⁰⁵ This view is corroborated by Coombs, who argues that Rogers’ “primary ministry up until the day he died was preaching the message of the Gospel. The denomination was never at the forefront of his mind or ministry. The denomination stuff was pretty much external to the church”.⁴⁰⁶ Even Falwell, the quintessential Christian Right figure, ‘did not want to sacrifice his ministerial career for a political cause’.⁴⁰⁷ Meanwhile, it was the SBC and the halls of power in Washington—not the churches themselves—that were seen as being the most appropriate institutions through which to change American politics and society. Based on the observation that evangelical leaders were reluctant to bring partisan politics into their churches, it is logical to conclude that the primary impetus behind churchgoing evangelicals’ lasting electoral loyalty to the GOP must have been something other than direct partisan pronouncements from pulpits like Bellevue’s. The next chapter will demonstrate that it was a shift in congregational culture—brought about indirectly through a combination of theological, demographic and cultural factors—which enabled churches like Bellevue to eschew partisan mobilisation while simultaneously facilitating the build-up of an electoral and political alliance between conservative evangelicalism and the Republican Party.

⁴⁰⁵ Adrian Rogers, quoted O’Brian, “Rogers declines”, p. 9.

⁴⁰⁶ Coombs, interview with author.

⁴⁰⁷ Williams, *God’s Own Party*, p. 173.

Chapter 4: Towards a Political-Cultural Explanation of the “Christian Right”: The Congregational Culture of Bellevue During the 1980s and Beyond

To what extent was there a version of Christian Right politics at conservative evangelical churches during the height of the movement’s nationwide activity, and what forms did this dimension of the Christian Right take? Chapter 4 seeks to answer these questions through a close analysis of Bellevue’s congregational culture during the 1980s. By shifting attention away from elite-level mobilisation, it is hoped that this chapter will begin to describe the nature and experiences of the Christian Right at a congregational level. This will in turn lead to an enhanced understanding of the mechanisms through which conservative evangelicalism was involved with politics and the Republican Party at a non-elite level. The following paragraphs confirm the suggestion made at the end of the last chapter, that during the height of the Christian Right’s political influence Bellevue’s leaders hesitated to bring partisan politics into the pulpit. Rogers never, for example, explicitly endorsed the Republican Party during his sermons or in any other medium, even in the wake of the SBC’s embracement of the GOP at the 1982 denomination convention. Instead, this chapter finds that during the 1980s a new form of political culture had started to exist at the church, which despite being ostensibly non-partisan mirrored key features of Christian Right and Republican Party conservatism during the period. This entailed a novel willingness to apply conservative evangelical principles to the issues which had, by the beginning of the 1980s, become the key Christian Right battlegrounds, including abortion, women’s rights and church-state separation. Bellevue’s new form of political culture also consisted of a mimicking of Republican Party conservatism, such as the church’s staunch patriotism and pro-military rhetoric. Thus, although Bellevue’s leaders never went as far as actively endorsing the GOP, the church’s new form of congregational culture had the effect of bringing, in cultural and political terms, the congregation closer to the Party. These findings are important because when applied at a broader level they provide a framework for explaining conservative evangelicalism’s post-1980 political and electoral affinity with the Republican Party. It is not difficult to see how the political culture elucidated below translated into partisan voting behaviour and conservative political ideology.

As demonstrated in the last chapter, Adrian Rogers’ decision to run for the SBC presidency, and in turn become heavily involved with main denominational branch of the Christian Right, was taken a short space of time before the 1979 election itself. Prior to his decision, he had been concerned for some time about the liberalism of the SBC’s seminaries, and at one point even considered withdrawing Bellevue from the denomination; but before 1979 these concerns were seldom aired publicly, either in the church or elsewhere, and he had appeared to be too focussed on his duties as a pastor to consider a denominational role up until that point. There is no evidence to suggest that Rogers sought to actively raise awareness of or mobilise support for his SBC campaign at Bellevue any time prior to his nomination. Thus, his nomination for the SBC presidency came as a surprise to most Bellevue members. One Bellevue layman who has been at the church since the Pollard era even recalled that “the first

time anyone knew anything about it was in the news. It came as a surprise.”⁴⁰⁸ But once Rogers’ campaign was underway, to what extent did the SBC conservative movement—in its various different forms—impact on the congregational culture of Bellevue, as one of the largest and most significant members of the Southern Baptist Convention? For some, the answer to this question was that the Conservative Resurgence had little or no effect on the church, even as Rogers was at the height of his denominational influence in 1979 and 1980. When asked if it felt like the atmosphere of the church had changed in the wake of Rogers’ election, or if Rogers’ sermons mentioned the Resurgence or targeted any particular issue more after the spring of 1979, Bellevue member David Coombs replied, “Not really. Of course he did preach and mention consistently what the issues were, you know, what the Bible says about these issues. He covered some of the issues [like abortion] in some of his sermons. But his primary ministry up until the day he died was preaching the Gospel. The denomination was never at the forefront of his mind or ministry.”⁴⁰⁹

Coombs’ notion that the politics of the SBC conservative movement did not directly trickle down to the congregation is consistent with Rogers’ insistence that he was always more concerned with his church than he was with his denomination, and with his contention that there was a clear dividing line between his denominational and political activity on the one hand, and his ministerial duties on the other. Rogers was fond of declaring that he was only interested in preaching what he saw as the infallible truths contained in the Gospel, as opposed to occupying himself with denominational or political issues during his sermons. Coombs suggested that the apparent lack of any denominational engagement at Bellevue is not surprising, given that, as a member of the Southern Baptist Convention, the church exercised full autonomy over its congregational affairs. “The denomination stuff was pretty much external to the church,” Coombs suggested, “and that’s the way it’s designed, each church is an autonomous thing”.⁴¹⁰ Bellevue, like other Southern Baptist churches, has a Congregationalist polity, which means all of its ‘authority rest[s] at the local church level’.⁴¹¹ Without any formal bureaucratic, religious or financial authority coming from the denomination, SBC churches are often less inclined to engage substantively with denominational issues. Formally speaking, then, the denomination did not have a stake in the way Bellevue was run, meaning the church was always likely to be less involved with the SBC than it would have been if the church had had to answer to a higher authority.

In 1980 the total membership of Bellevue stood at over 11,000. It was therefore inevitable that such a large congregation had at least some variation in terms of the extent to which individual congregants engaged with denominational and political issues. For many people in the congregation, Bellevue’s religious culture was consumed solely as a means to individual spiritual enrichment, rather than for its place in relation to the broader denominational realms that existed outside of the church’s pews. When asked if there were any particular denominational, political or social issues which concerned him as an evangelical during the seventies and eighties, David Coombs replied, “No. I was in my twenties and raising a family and starting a career. And I was more focussed on that stuff.

⁴⁰⁸ David Coombs, interview with author.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹¹ Mulder, *Shades of White Flight*, p. 7.

Which was also the case for most of the people around me”.⁴¹² Based on these insights, it would be an exaggeration to suggest that the severity of the SBC’s overhaul was reflected at a local congregational level by an equally drastic increase in engagement with the SBC conservatives’ political and denominational agendas. In other words, for some members of Bellevue, the Conservative Resurgence and the politics of the Christian Right were spiritually as well as geographically remote features of their religious lives, and were easily overshadowed by concerns closer to home, such individual spirituality, families, and careers.

In 2005, Bellevue was the subject of a presentation by historian of the SBC Barry Hankins, which was delivered to a Southern Historical Association conference held in Memphis. Although the paper was devoted mainly to the pastoral history of the church and its relocation to Cordova, Hankins briefly addressed the question of whether Bellevue had become more conservative during Rogers’ tenure. He suggested that Bellevue had not ‘shifted to the right’ in the last thirty years because ‘the church has always been very conservative’.⁴¹³ As previous chapters have touched upon, it is true that each of Bellevue’s pastors has, theologically speaking, been stongly conservative and strictly inerrantist. In political and economic terms, however, it is difficult to determine where the majority of Bellevue’s members stood prior to the civil rights movement, but there is no evidence to suggest that the congregation was liberally inclined during the first half of the twentieth century.⁴¹⁴ It would therefore be inaccurate to suggest that the arrival of Rogers represented an increase in the degree of conservatism at the church. Moreover, since the *raison d’être* of most religions is to offer a set of universal moral truths—with universalism being a particularly important value for biblical inerrantists—most evangelicals would argue that whether or not they have become “more conservative” is irrelevant, since they aim to abide by the same fixed principles which by definition never change. Thus, rather than probing into whether Bellevue had become *more* conservative during the Rogers pastorate, it is perhaps more worthwhile to consider whether there had been a change in the way Bellevue’s brand of SBC conservatism was *channelled*: that is, to what extent did Bellevue’s religious discourses and congregational culture change during the important period of Rogers’ tenure, even if the essence of the church’s theology remained the same?

Beyond Theological Conservatism: Bellevue and the Equal Rights Amendment

Archival evidence suggests that from around the time of Rogers’ first presidential term, Bellevue started to display new forms of engagement with the political initiatives of the

⁴¹² Coombs, interview with author.

⁴¹³ Hankins, “White Flight, Shift to the Right”.

⁴¹⁴ Due to a lack of resources available for the period, there is limited scope for determining where the majority of Bellevue’s members stood on the political and economic spectrum in the first half of the twentieth century. But Wayne Flynt has shown that despite their theological conservatism, Southern Baptists in Alabama during the 1930s were overwhelmingly supportive of Roosevelt’s economic programme, demonstrating that—during the Great Depression at least—conservative evangelicals often had few qualms about voting Democrat. Wayne Flint, “Religion for the Blues: Evangelicalism, Poor Whites, and the Great Depression,” *The Journal of Southern History*, 71 (2005), pp. 3 – 38, accessed March 31, 2016, DOI: 10.2307/27648650.

Christian Right, sharing the movement's preoccupations with "moral issues" such as abortion, church-state separation and the family. This new engagement demonstrates that Bellevue's conservatism was for the first time being channelled in more ostensibly political (though not partisan) ways, and suggests that the church's congregational culture was starting to become a more hospitable environment for Republican Party conservatism. One of the first examples of this was in May 1980, when Rogers hosted a major three-day conference at Bellevue which discussed evangelical approaches to "women's issues". The Mid-Continent Christian Women's Concerns Conference attracted 4,000 women from all over the country and 'packed two auditoriums' at the church.⁴¹⁵ Rogers used his opening speech at the Conference to 'warn...against yielding to humanistic morality' and "attempting to solve the problems of mankind apart from God".⁴¹⁶ Rogers also made the biblical case for conservative gender roles, arguing "I'm of the opinion that a woman is infinitely superior to a man—at being a woman—and a man is infinitely superior than [sic] a woman—at being a man...We are equal but thank God we are not the same". He argued that succumbing to humanistic morality was "a highway to hell", and that people should instead adopt values based on the Word of God.⁴¹⁷

Although the views expressed by Rogers come as little surprise, the timing and scale of the event suggests there was more to it than simply an arbitrary occasion to discuss evangelical approaches towards women's roles. Not only did the Conference—the first of its type to be held at Bellevue—take place during Rogers' first term as SBC president, but it also corresponded to the height of the controversy surrounding the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), a campaign dating back to the 1920s which sought to legally guarantee equal social and economic rights for women. By the beginning of the 1970s supporters of the ERA were becoming increasingly hopeful that ratification could be achieved, with the Amendment passing through Congress in 1972 and thirty-five of the necessary thirty-eight states approving the Amendment. Conservative evangelicals, however, were fervently against the ERA because they saw it as a threat to conservative "family values" and gender roles. While the momentum behind the Amendment was peaking, the Christian Right became heavily involved in the fight against its ratification. Predictably, Jerry Falwell stepped in to the debates to become one of the ERA's harshest critics. He 'explicitly tied the feminist movement's rejection of traditional gender roles to social disintegration,' arguing in his typically hyperbolic and reactionary style that "the Equal Rights Amendment strikes at the very foundation of our entire social structure".⁴¹⁸ Accordingly, conservative evangelicals' campaign relied on stigmatising proponents of the ERA, who were labelled as "anti-family" radicals. Although the first deadline for the Ratification of the amendment passed in 1979, in 1978 the cut-off date had been extended to June 1982. This meant that during the Conference at Bellevue in May 1980 there was still a possibility that the amendment would gain the required number of state approvals to become enshrined in law. Although the newspaper report which covered the Women's Concerns Conference at Bellevue made no explicit

⁴¹⁵ "Rogers Urges Women to Reject Humanism", *Baptist New Mexican*, May 24, 1980, p. 3.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid; Adrian Rogers, quoted in *ibid*.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid.

⁴¹⁸ Brantley W. Gasaway, *Progressive Evangelicals and the Pursuit of Social Justice*, (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014), p. 55; Jerry Falwell, quoted in *ibid*.

mention of the ERA, the content and timing of the event leaves little doubt that it was organised in direct response to the perceived threats posed by the Amendment. Indeed, the unwillingness by Bellevue and the conservative Baptist press to explicitly mention the ERA supports this thesis's suggestion that even during the era of Bellevue's new form of political culture, the church's leaders wanted to avoid the partisan political implications of the issues they were engaged with. "It's not a matter of equality. Before the Lord Jesus we are all equal, but we are not the same", Rogers argued in his opening speech, alluding to the language of the women's rights campaign.⁴¹⁹

The ultimate failure of feminists and equal rights campaigners to force through the ratification of the ERA can be explained in part by the success of conservative evangelicals in mobilising resistance to the Amendment at both governmental and grassroots levels. In the South—the heartland of the SBC and the Christian Right—resistance to the ERA was particularly high. Each state in the South either refused to ratify the ERA, fell just short of ratifying it, or rescinded its ratification sometime between 1974 and 1978 (Tennessee ratified in 1972 but then rescinded in 1974). By the end of the decade, every state in the South was officially against ratification. Sensing a shift of momentum in the battle between the pro- and anti-ERA campaigns, the Christian Right decided in 1979 to elevate 'their opposition to a national scope'.⁴²⁰ Exercising the unprecedented political influence that the group had attained in recent years, the Christian Right helped convince the Republican Party to 'drop its previous support of the ERA'.⁴²¹ This officially took place at the Republican National Convention in 1980, just two months after the Women's Concerns Conference at Bellevue. As was often the case with the Christian Right, the movement's success in derailing the ERA campaign would not have been possible without tapping in to the simmering resentments of southern white evangelicals at a grassroots level. 'Conservative evangelicals' successful grassroots campaigns against the ERA's final ratification inspired many evangelicals to oppose the "anti-family" agenda of feminists,' and ultimately helped tip the scales of the debate towards an overall veto.⁴²² As a grassroots campaign, meetings like the Women's Concerns Conference at Bellevue were therefore crucial instruments for rallying resistance to the ERA. Although those in attendance would have already been sympathetic towards the principles of the anti-ERA campaign, the Conference and other similar events motivated evangelicals to resist the Amendment more actively. With around 4000 in attendance, Bellevue's Conference was one of the larger meetings of its kind, and it took place at an important historical moment when the anti-ERA campaign was close to defeating the Amendment outright. The event demonstrates that from the early 1980s onwards, Bellevue's congregation was displaying a greater willingness to apply its conservative evangelical principles to political situations.

Bellevue's Political Culture During the 1980 Presidential Election and Beyond

⁴¹⁹ Adrian Rogers, quoted in "Rogers Urges Women", p. 3.

⁴²⁰ Gasaway, *Progressive Evangelicals*, p. 55.

⁴²¹ Ibid.

⁴²² Ibid.

In November 1980, six months after the Women's Concerns Conference and on the eve of the United States presidential election, Rogers gave a sermon at Bellevue which tackled another key SBC conservative issue: the relationship between church and state. As discussed in the last chapter, many SBC conservatives argued that since the surrounding culture had become more hostile towards the Southern Baptist faith, the state should adopt a "friendlier" stance towards religion than its current approach. Rogers would spend much of his last twenty-five years as a preacher emphasising—or, as many secular historians would claim, grossly exaggerating—the role of Protestant Christianity in the drafting of the US Constitution and in influencing American political life thereafter.⁴²³ Rogers' views were 'consistent with the populist critique of [secular] scholarship' that was emerging in SBC conservative circles in the 1980s.⁴²⁴ He would 'label as revisionists all those who would like to take away "our Christian heritage" by omitting from their work references to God and his providence'.⁴²⁵ In the aforementioned sermon at Bellevue, which was entitled "The Great Debate between Church and State", Rogers fleshed out some of the arguments that he had made to the denominational community during his SBC presidency:

"I want to remind you that the framers of our Constitution were men whose lives had been soaked in the Holy Scripture, and therefore they wrote this First Amendment...it says that Congress is not going to establish a new church, and Congress is not going to prohibit the free exercise of our worship. But let me say this: what we call the separation of church and state was *never in their wildest dreams* considered to mean the separation of God from the government. They knew better than that, as a matter of fact when they declared their independence they said, 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are endowed by their Creator'"⁴²⁶

The sentiment of this extract epitomises Rogers' perspective on the relationship between religion, state and government. As he would do throughout his career as a preacher and denominational politician, Rogers recognised the separation of church and state while at the same time insisting that God and spirituality should have a greater role in politics and government than the current situation. Rogers' favourite mantra, repeated innumerable times in sermons, church literature, articles and denominational material, was that "I am strongly opposed to any state-supported religion, *but I do not believe in the separation of God and government*, and neither did our founding fathers".⁴²⁷ As discussed in detail in the last chapter, although Rogers never went as far as rejecting the separation

⁴²³ The most comprehensive critique of the argument that the US Constitution was heavily influenced by the Bible comes from Isaac Kramnick and R. Laurence Moore, *The Godless Constitution: A Moral Defence of the Secular State*, (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2005). More recently, historian Kevin Kruse has also taken issue with the widespread assumption that the United States has always been a formally Christian nation. In *One Nation Under God*, Kruse argues that the origins of such assumptions are rooted in powerful business and religious leaders' resistance to the New Deal state in the 1930s. Kruse, *One Nation Under God*.

⁴²⁴ Hankins, *Uneasy in Babylon*, p. 68. Rogers' views on church-state separation

⁴²⁵ Ibid.

⁴²⁶ Adrian Rogers, "The Great Debate between Church and State", church sermon, November 2, 1980, sound recording, DMCF. Original emphasis.

⁴²⁷ Adrian Rogers, quoted in Hastey, "Rogers joins crusade", p. 5. Emphasis added.

of church and state outright, he nonetheless argued that First Amendment rulings had gone too far in their applications. As he argued in an interview conducted in 1997, “I think the First Amendment, rightly understood, allows for free expression of our religious values, but I think we’ve done an extreme overkill to try to keep a few from being offended”.⁴²⁸ The Bellevue pastor’s approach towards church-state separation and America’s Christian heritage mimicked those of other leading conservative evangelical pastors who were associated with the Christian Right. His views on the Founding Fathers were, for instance, almost identical to those of Jerry Falwell, who argued in a well-known sermon that “This is a Christian nation. And was so intended to be by our Founding Fathers...Our Fathers came to this continent to forge one nation under God”.⁴²⁹

In the “The Great Debate between Church and State,” Rogers’ views on the relationship between religion and government lay the foundations for a justification for Christians to involve themselves with politics. He used the sermon as way of introducing to his congregation the same accommodationist principles that he had been working hard to promote during his first term as SBC president. In the second half of the sermon Rogers argued that there were six “duties to government” which every Christian should abide by. These included the importance of paying taxes, praying for the government, and respecting the law. But the most important of Rogers’ guidelines for the purposes of this chapter were the fourth and sixth principles, which taught the importance of *preaching* to the government and of *participating* in the government respectively. These maxims provide an insight into the theological rationale behind Rogers’ willingness to encourage his church to actively engage with what he and his movement saw as the pertinent political issues of the period, whilst simultaneously avoiding making a direct endorsement of the Republican Party’s current electoral campaign. Using passages from the Bible to support his arguments, Rogers argued “We need to preach to our country. We need to prophesise to our country. There are some people who tell us because of the separation of church and state, *that we who are Christians are not supposed to say anything!* That suddenly because we are saved and we belong to some church, we are to be mute, we are to be disenfranchised...The Founding Fathers never meant that because we belong to some church...we cannot speak and prophesise”.⁴³⁰ Rogers applied this reasoning to abortion, which by 1980 had become, alongside school prayer, the dominant Christian Right concern: “Dear friends, if we are silent, God is going to hold us accountable. You think of the terrible sin of abortion in America today. Dear friends, that one thing alone is going to bring us down as a nation if we don’t solve it...We dare not be silent...I believe it is time God’s people spoke up”.⁴³¹ As with the “women’s issues” conference, this example illustrates how one of the Christian Right’s core issues became the subject of discussion at a congregational level, and how a theological imperative was used to justify political engagement with the matter (whilst simultaneously avoiding making the kind

⁴²⁸ Rogers, interview with Barry Hankins, 18 August, 1997.

⁴²⁹ Jerry Falwell, “America Back to God”, sermon, 1976, sound recording, accessed April 21, 2016, <http://fundamentalbaptistsermons.net/Audio/FalwellAmericaBackToGodLP.mp3>.

⁴³⁰ Rogers, “The Great Debate Between Church and State”. Original emphasis.

⁴³¹ Ibid.

of partisan endorsement that one might expect at a church which was part of a religious group which was disproportionately Republican in its political orientations).

Rogers' sixth and final imperative was for Christians to "participate in government", by which he meant the necessity of voting. "You need to vote," he proclaimed. "You are sinning against God [if you don't vote] ...And when you vote...you vote *principle*. You find out what's right from the Word of God. And you vote [for] that principle.⁴³² It's not a matter of parties, it's not a matter of policies, it's not a matter of personalities, it *is* a matter of divine principle". Rogers concluded his sermon by instructing, "Don't you put your hope in any political process, or in any political person, you put your faith in God...It's not right and left, it's right and wrong".⁴³³ Here Rogers was informing his audience that it was their moral obligation to engage with politics and to vote according to which candidate most closely aligned with God's principles. A few years later, while Rogers was serving his third term as SBC president, and when the pastor's nationwide recognition was arguably at its peak, Rogers repeated these sentiments in an interview with a national newspaper. When asked if he thought there was anything wrong with religious leaders engaging with politics, Rogers replied, "I believe in the right of every American, whether he be religious or not, to participate in the political affairs of our country. As a matter of fact, I believe I think a Christian sins if he does not participate".⁴³⁴

As with the Women's Conference, one of the most significant aspects of Rogers' sermon was its timing. As the last chapter demonstrated, 1980 was a highly important year for the SBC and the Christian Right, as well as for Rogers and McAteer's careers. But in order to grasp the real significance of the church-state sermon at Bellevue, it is necessary to pay attention to exact *day* on which it was delivered. Rogers preached "The Great Debate between Church and State" on November 2, 1980—just two days before that year's presidential election. Although the sermon made no mention of the election or of the two main candidates, the content of the address, combined with the political context for conservative evangelicals in November 1980, would have left few in the audience with any doubt about who they were supposed to be voting for the following Tuesday. By November of 1980, the majority of conservative evangelicals had turned their back on the incumbent and Democratic candidate, Jimmy Carter. Despite being a born-again Christian and therefore "one of their own", 'fundamentalists and conservative evangelicals quickly realized that Carter's type of Christianity was far removed from their own'.⁴³⁵ His liberal stances on issues such as women's rights—as demonstrated by his support for the ERA—left evangelicals of Rogers and McAteer's ilk feeling disillusioned. Meanwhile, in the wake of the National Affairs Briefing and other

⁴³² Here Rogers' sentiment once again echoed his colleague Jerry Falwell. In his evangelical manifesto published at the height of his political influence, Falwell argued that evangelicals who were not registered to vote was 'one of the major sins of the church today'. Jerry Falwell, *Listen, America! The Conservative Blueprint for Americans' Moral Rebirth*, (Doubleday Publishing Co, 1980), p. 226.

⁴³³ Ibid. Original emphasis.

⁴³⁴ Adrian Rogers, quoted in Mark Mayfield, "If you must label me, call me Christian", *USA Today*, June 16, 1986, p. 13a

⁴³⁵ Williams, *God's Own Party*, p. 133.

important campaign events, Ronald Reagan had emerged as the new posterchild of conservative evangelical causes. Within months of winning the Republican primaries, Reagan had publically endorsed a bill which would see unborn foetuses become legally protected against abortion by the Fourteenth Amendment, and had presided over a party that had dropped its decade-old support for the ERA.⁴³⁶ While the Carter campaign struggled with the all-but-impossible task of appealing to both its left-of-centre Democrat base and the growing electoral force of conservative evangelicals, Reagan unequivocally endorsed socially conservative values in a way that resonated far more clearly with Southern Baptists.⁴³⁷ Back at Bellevue, for a congregation that had been urged to vote according to evangelical moral principles (but not, it is important to note, with explicit instructions to vote for a certain candidate), Reagan's unambiguous stances made deciding who to support in the forthcoming election a straightforward task. Like with countless other SBC churches, Reagan had captured the hearts and minds of Bellevue's members, and inspired countless evangelicals who had never voted before to embrace the Republican party. As a result, 'Carter took a horrendous beating in the South,' with 'his share of the Southern Baptist vote dropp[ing] from 56 percent in 1976 to 34 percent in 1980'.⁴³⁸

Bellevue's greater engagement with politics continued, albeit sporadically, throughout the 1980s and beyond. In 1983 a notice appeared in Bellevue's official church bulletin, the *Bellevue Baptist Messenger*, which advertised an event at the church which would discuss 'God's solution to this moral pollution'. 'Are you troubled by the moral degradation in our nation?' the flyer asked. 'Are you appalled by the moral perversion that is sweeping our city?' 'Are you concerned about the moral decay that is eroding our homes?' it continued. The meeting was arranged to discuss Christian responses to these issues, and to have 'informative seminars on abortion, pornography, rock music and humanism'. The 'special guest speaker' for the event was to be Ed McAteer who, in a similar vein to Rogers' sermon three years earlier, would talk about the separation of church and state at the event.⁴³⁹ Although there is no further record of the event or McAteer's speech, the content of the meeting indicates that Christian Right-style religious discourse did exist at the church during this important period. The attempts made by the church to channel conservative evangelical discourse in a more public setting continued into the decade,

⁴³⁶ Stuart Taylor, Jr, "Bill to Ban Abortions is assailed by Scholars as Unconstitutional," *New York Times*, April 22, 1981, accessed September 2, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/1981/04/22/us/bill-to-ban-abortions-is-assailed-by-scholars-as-unconstitutional.html>.

⁴³⁷ Indeed, Carter's re-election campaign was hindered by attacks from all sides of the political spectrum, meaning he could not truly rely on support from any one group. But it was the Southern Baptist abandonment of Carter which was in many ways the most surprising development of his second presidential campaign. 'Carter received low public approval ratings from nearly all demographic groups, but because he was a Southern Baptist from Georgia, many of his supporters had expected him to retain his appeal among southern evangelicals. Instead, "born-again" preachers had become some of his harshest critics'. Williams, *God's Own Party*, p. 184.

⁴³⁸ Heineman, *God is a Conservative*, p. 121.

⁴³⁹ *Bellevue Baptist Messenger*, Vol. 23, No. 1, August 4, 1983. Library, Bellevue Baptist Church, Cordova, TN.

with Rogers delivering a 'keynote address' at the annual Walk for Life anti-abortion campaign in 1989, which took place in Memphis. 'A crowd of approximately 1,400 persons, many from Bellevue, filled the auditorium of Central High School,' and the event 'concluded with a peaceful walk to the office building housing Planned Parenthood, where a brief ceremony was held'.⁴⁴⁰

Forty-three years after the magazine first ran a profile on the church, when it described Bellevue as one of the 'great churches of America', *Christian Century* returned to Bellevue in 1993 in an attempt to understand the 'metamorphosis' that it had undergone 'over the past four decades'.⁴⁴¹ By the 1990s Bellevue's most obvious transformation was, of course, its change of location from Midtown Memphis to Cordova (as discussed in detail in the next chapter). But the article also addressed the relationship between the different forms of conservatism that existed at the church, and the findings support this chapter's contention that Bellevue's congregational culture was more receptive to political conservatism in the 1980s and 1990s than it had been in previous decades. Historian of American Protestantism Randall Balmer, the article's author, first noted the militaristic tone of the Sunday service, which included renditions of "Victory in Jesus" and "Mighty Warrior" by the church choir and orchestra. In the sermon Balmer attended Rogers once again bemoaned how American society and political life had lost touch with God: "Americans used to live by the word of God and run the government by the Constitution that came out of the word of God. Today we're just making it we as we go along".⁴⁴² Balmer argued that the church's conservatism sat 'well with the people of Bellevue, despite the trappings of middle-class America [that were] evident everywhere' in and around the new Cordova campus.⁴⁴³ He noticed that the "creek bank" theology that Bellevue had held on to despite its move to the suburbs had, under Rogers, 'manifest[ed] itself in adulation for the military and an old fashioned patriotic fervor'.⁴⁴⁴ Ever since 1976, the US bicentennial and Rogers' fifth year at Bellevue's helm, the church had held an annual "Celebrate America" day, featuring music performances and military re-enactments. Balmer noted that during the event Bellevue's worship centre 'looked for all the world like the Republican National Convention'.⁴⁴⁵

Blended together with Bellevue's strict, inerrantist theology and patriotic zeal, Balmer argued, was a political conservatism which, according to some of the people the journalist spoke to for his article, was informed by Bellevue's version of religious conservatism. 'When I asked Trent Hall [a Bellevue layman] how his theology affected his vote, he opined that "someone who pretends that his beliefs don't affect how he votes has jello for brains"'. Others identified strongly with the need for school prayer and "family values", and spoke out against abortion. As if to symbolise the increased

⁴⁴⁰ *Bellevue Baptist Messenger*, "A Voice for Life", Vol. 29, No. 4, January 26, 1989. Library, Bellevue Baptist Church, Cordova, TN.

⁴⁴¹ Randall Balmer, "Churchgoing: Bellevue Baptist Church near Memphis", *Christian Century*, May 5, 1993.

⁴⁴² Adrian Rogers, quoted in *ibid*, p. 485.

⁴⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 486.

⁴⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p. 487.

⁴⁴⁵ *Ibid*.

willingness to apply conservative evangelical principles to politics, while Balmer was visiting the church it had even installed a voter registration booth. As Balmer conversed with members next to the registration booth after the sermon, one woman told him that ‘voters coming out of Bellevue Baptist were conservative and Republican—that is, “if they’re really in tune with what’s being taught here”’.⁴⁴⁶ These findings support this chapter’s contention that from the beginning of the 1980s a new conservative political culture was being created at Bellevue. As Balmer confirms, this political culture mirrored some of the key features of the GOP’s right wing during the 1980s—such as fervent patriotism and conservative “social values”—and in some instances even led to an active embracement or endorsement of the Party from within the church’s pews (although not from Rogers himself).

Not everyone involved with the church approved of Bellevue’s recent slant towards politics. For some, Bellevue’s engagement with the political domain was an unwise distraction from the church’s core purpose of preaching the gospel. This was a view held by Bellevue layman Dan Greer, who argued that sometime in the mid-1990s, in the wake of the election of Bill Clinton and the apparent lull in influence of the conservative movement, Bellevue’s congregation came to the realisation that ‘the answer for the church was not in Washington but was in a renewed faith in God. This entire, painful process was a real blessing,’ he continued, ‘because the church was beginning to be involved in many social and moral issues that were draining resources away from the main mission of proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ to a lost and dying world’.⁴⁴⁷ During the height of the congregation’s engagement with politics, Bellevue had become ‘distracted by the seductive powers of the entire political process,’ Greer concluded.⁴⁴⁸ This chapter’s assertion that there was a tangible shift in the congregational culture at Bellevue from the beginning of the 1980s is supported by the fact that not everyone approved of the church’s political engagement. The discontent felt by some towards the direction the church was taking suggests that the shift was palpable enough for at least a portion of the church to have taken notice. Although not every member of the congregation engaged with this new dimension of Bellevue’s environment, a new impulse behind applying the church’s long-held conservative evangelical principles to political situations nonetheless existed.

Conclusion

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁷ Greer, “Bellevue Baptist Church”, p. 15. Bellevue’s apparent disillusionment with the political realm sometime in the mid-1990s indeed corresponds to the second “phase” of the Christian Right, otherwise referred to as the “age of realism”, when in the wake of the 1988 presidential election the movement began to suffer from a prolonged post-Reagan period of disappointment. This suggests Bellevue was on this level mirroring the political trends of the Christian Right at a broader level. Robert Booth Fowler, Allen D. Hertzke, Laura R. Olson, and Kevin R. den Dulk, *Religion and Politics in America: Faith, Culture, and Strategic Choice* [Fifth Edition], (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2013), p. 141.

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 16.

The aim of this chapter has been to examine the transformation of Bellevue's congregational culture that took place in the wake of the processes described in previous chapters. Although most of Chapter 4 has been devoted to arguing that a new conservative political culture was created at the church from the beginning of the 1980s, it began by acknowledging that there also existed a notable proportion of the congregation that was unengaged with the agendas of the Conservative Resurgence and the Christian Right. For Bellevue members like David Coombs, personal concerns such as spirituality, family and career comfortably eclipsed any interest they may have had with applying their faith to the public sphere. In other words, for these members the SBC headquarters in Nashville and the corridors of power in Washington were as spiritually irrelevant as they were geographically distant. Indeed, with a membership of over eleven thousand in 1980—a number which would continue to rise exponentially over the course of the decade—it is not surprising that there were different degrees to which Bellevue's members engaged with denominational and political issues. This chapter has also warned against the notion that Bellevue suddenly became *more* conservative in the early 1980s—at least in terms of theology. The cornerstone of Bellevue's belief system has always been its staunchly conservative, inerrantist theology. The essence of this theology can be traced as far back as the church's early twentieth century establishment, and to all intents and purposes it did not change from one pastor to the next.

Rather, this chapter has suggested that what was taking place from the early 1980s onwards was a change in the way Bellevue's conservatism was *channelled*. This entailed applying, in novel ways, its long-held conservative evangelical principles to political situations, and was part of the creation of a new political culture at the church which mirrored several key features of Republican Party and Christian Right conservatism. Although Rogers refrained from ever making partisan political endorsements from the pulpit, he did sometimes display a new keenness for his congregation to make informed judgements about who to vote for based on conservative evangelical principles. Meanwhile, Rogers also allowed his church to become, albeit sporadically, a venue for discussing SBC conservative and Christian Right agendas. The political cultural framework discussed in this chapter has provided insights into the forms the so-called "Christian Right" took at a non-elite level. The findings also help explain how the movement's long-standing electoral and political allegiances with the Republican Party were orchestrated within conservative evangelical churches themselves.

Chapter 5: “Claiming our Canaan”: Bellevue’s Relocation to Cordova

Bellevue Baptist Church is perhaps the best-known example of a Southern Baptist church which relocated from an ethnically diverse inner-city neighbourhood to a white suburb. But aside from rudimentary accounts of evangelical suburbanisation, which often take the concept of “white flight” for granted, little serious work has been done to explain Bellevue’s relocation or the countless other cases of white Protestant urban withdrawal.⁴⁴⁹ This chapter attempts to answer the question of why Bellevue eventually decided to relocate from Midtown Memphis to a site in Cordova, thirteen miles east of the old facility. It tells the story of the seven-year process of deliberation, construction and preparation that took place between 1982 and 1989, and which culminated in the withdrawal of the church from the neighbourhood it had been based in for eighty-six years. As the following paragraphs will demonstrate, Bellevue’s relocation was the result of a complex combination of strategic considerations, racial and demographic issues, congregational demand, and religious agendas. It is argued that Bellevue’s relocation was ultimately facilitated by three main, interrelated factors: its spiritual priority of soul saving over social ministries (a product of its inerrantist theology), the church’s lack of connections with its surrounding community, and its low level of racial integration (both of which were symptoms of Bellevue’s indifference towards “reaching out” towards the changing Midtown community). These latter two points are also related to the creation of Bellevue’s new form of political culture, as described in the last chapter. That is, Bellevue’s political culture during the 1980s was incompatible with a progressive approach towards race and segregation because its preoccupation with certain issues such as abortion deflected attention away from race, and also because the same political culture helped marginalise African Americans through the church’s close associations with the the Republican Party, the Conservative Resurgence and the “New Right”.

Besides offering insights into the causes of evangelical white flight, a secondary aim of this chapter is to begin to investigate the religious meanings and spiritual significance of evangelical white flight. This will be achieved by examining the ways in which Bellevue constructed religious discourses in response to its experiences of urban withdrawal. An analysis of the various documents, bulletins, letters, pastoral interviews, and other church documents that were published around the time of Bellevue’s relocation reveals how the church’s suburbanisation was imbued with different forms of spiritual meaning. This has allowed for a new understanding of the religious significance of the otherwise familiar concept of “white flight”. Bellevue’s congregation and leadership could never truly avoid the potential moral ramifications of “withdrawing” from, “departing” or “abandoning” a struggling inner-city neighbourhood (as the frequent local newspaper coverage of the move made sure of). But the clear approval of the relocation by the majority of the church’s members—combined with the numerous logistical and religious benefits of the move—enabled the church to create a celebratory atmosphere around the relocation. Within Bellevue’s pews, the relocation was labelled a “Victory in Jesus”, and the new site in Cordova

⁴⁴⁹ As discussed in the Introduction, the two main exceptions to this are Dochuk ““Praying for a Wicked City”” and Mulder, *Shades of White Flight*.

was considered to be Bellevue's very own "Promised Land". Overall, this chapter suggests that the causes and experiences of Bellevue's relocation were intimately linked with—and indeed a direct legacy of—the type of relationship that the church had created with urban change and its surrounding community over the previous three decades.

Ten Year Plan

In September 1982, on the tenth anniversary of Adrian Rogers' tenure at Bellevue, an important announcement was made to the congregation. After around three years of discussions with Bellevue's Long Range Planning Committee, Rogers was finally ready to publically introduce the "Ten Year Plan", an ambitious initiative which aimed to complete the church's transformation from the struggling inner-city congregation that pastor Pollard had left behind to a thriving, modern megachurch. Over the next decade, the announcement declared, Bellevue sought to baptise ten thousand people, spend \$20 million dollars on missions, expand its ministries and, in order to accommodate such a plan, spend a further \$30 million on a building program which included a proposed new worship centre with a capacity of between six and ten thousand people. The scale of Bellevue's ambitions spoke volumes about how far the church had come in the space of just ten years. In 1972, Bellevue appeared to be in a terminal decline: during Sunday services the church's sanctuary was often half-empty, and its membership was made up disproportionately of elderly people from the Pastor Lee era. But, as discussed in Chapter 2, the arrival of Rogers had transformed Bellevue's fortunes. In his first ten years at Bellevue he had attracted almost four thousand new members, doubled the average Sunday school attendance, and quadrupled the total amount of charitable donations received. As incredible as it would have seemed a decade prior to the announcement of the Ten Year Plan, by the 1980s Bellevue was in desperate need of more space to accommodate the growth that the church had achieved since Rogers had become pastor. One indication of Bellevue's need for more space was the fact that Rogers was having to deliver three separate Sunday sermons at the church each week. It was clear, therefore, that Bellevue would need more than simply an expansion of its current facilities; instead, it would need a sanctuary which was capable of housing several thousand more than the current three thousand-seat venue. Along with the issue of how Bellevue was going to fund the program, the main question was therefore where Bellevue was planning on building the new facility.

As a white congregation in an increasingly African American neighbourhood, the possibility of relocating to the suburbs must have been taken seriously by Bellevue's Long Range Planning Committee from the very beginning of the Ten Year Plan. There were several obvious advantages to moving away from the inner-city. Since many of Bellevue's members had already moved away from Midtown as part of the Memphis's post-busing wave of white flight, the suburbs would have been a far more demographically "appropriate" site than its current location. Moreover, land was both cheaper and more plentiful in the suburbs than it was in the crowded inner-city. Despite these advantages, however, during the early stages of the Ten Year Plan Bellevue appeared to be surprisingly resolute about committing its long-term future to Midtown. A few days after Rogers officially unveiled the Ten Year Plan, the church's official bulletin, the *Bellevue Baptist Messenger*, hinted that the site for the new sanctuary was closer to home than many would have expected: 'At this time, we anticipate

that *upon this land* will have to be built a new worship center with a seating capacity of between 6,000 and 10,000'.⁴⁵⁰ But the most unequivocal declaration of Bellevue's commitment to stay in Midtown came from Dr Rogers himself. Church leaders had flirted with the idea of relocating, Rogers admitted in an interview with a local Memphis newspaper in September 1982, "But we have decided, emphatically decided, that God has planted us right here in the heart of Memphis, Tennessee".⁴⁵¹ Nonetheless, despite the ardent tone of Rogers' pledge to stay in Midtown, less than a year later the church would vote overwhelmingly in favour of moving to the suburbs. What were the causes of Bellevue's decision to relocate? By examining the various structural, social and religious forces involved, this chapter hopes to answer the question of why Bellevue ultimately opted to withdraw from the inner-city and move to the suburbs of Cordova.

The extent of Bellevue's commitment to Midtown during the early days of the Ten Year Plan went much further than Rogers' rhetoric. In fact, in the spring of 1983 Bellevue's Long Range Planning Committee went as far as commissioning a Dallas-based architecture firm to carry out a "master plan" for Bellevue's expansion in the Midtown area. The firm published a report to outline its recommendations which contained five key "assumptions" about the church's expansion—one of which was that 'Bellevue Baptist Church will remain at its present location in midtown Memphis'.⁴⁵² The firm suggested Bellevue acquire more land on the 'existing site' so that the campus would eventually encompass a whole "superblock" of church facilities. As long as enough land could be attained, the report concluded, there would be enough space for the church to build a new worship centre and parking facilities, amongst other things. Bellevue was already in the advanced stages of this plan by the time the decision was made, in November 1984, to relocate. David Coombs, who was on the building committee for the Midtown expansion, recalls how "We had no intention of moving from where we were. So we were acquiring land to build a new auditorium".⁴⁵³ At one stage the church had acquired around fifty parcels of land in the area surrounding the church 'on which', as one local newspaper saw it, the church 'plan[ned] to build the cornerstone for the congregation's future'.⁴⁵⁴ The acquisitions included 'two relatively modern occupied apartment buildings', the attainment of which drew criticism from locals for 'spreading an "asphalt jungle" in the neighbourhood and displacing residents'. But irrespective of the social effects that Bellevue's purchases had on the neighbourhood, its land parcels project was a further indication of the willingness of the church to stay on the existing site rather than relocate.

It is not immediately clear why, at the outset of the Ten Year Plan, Bellevue's leaders were so convinced by the idea of staying in Midtown. Countless other large white evangelical congregations in the South and beyond had, by the 1980s, long since abandoned their inner-

⁴⁵⁰ "Facilities and Finances—\$30 Million", *Bellevue Baptist Messenger*, Vol. 22, No. 37, September 16 1982, p. 3, BBT – Canaan Move Brochures/Messengers – Special folder, DMCF. Emphasis added.

⁴⁵¹ Adrian Rogers, quoted in Michael Clark, "Bellevue Baptist Unveils Huge Project", *The Commercial Appeal*, September 14, 1982, p. 12.

⁴⁵² "Master Planning: Bellevue Baptist Church, Memphis, Tennessee", Hatfield Halcomb Architects, BBT – Midtown Property Master Plan folder, DMCF.

⁴⁵³ David Coombs, interview with author.

⁴⁵⁴ 3733

city neighbourhoods. The two existing academic studies of evangelical white flight—both of which examine congregations in Rust Belt cities, rather than the South—featured case studies which had withdrawn from the inner-city no later than the end of the 1970s, which was at least ten years prior to Bellevue’s own relocation. But these examples are merely the tip of the iceberg; thousands of other white congregations across the nation participated in the phenomenon of white flight at some point between 1950 and 1980.⁴⁵⁵ And as Mark T. Mulder discusses in his study of evangelical congregations in Chicago, Protestant churches are often particularly susceptible to suburbanisation because they tend to ascribe to ‘their surroundings less religious or spiritual significance’ than, for example, Catholic churches.⁴⁵⁶ In sum, it is in many ways surprising that Bellevue did not choose to relocate several years earlier, particularly given the extremity of white flight in Memphis during the 1970s. As well as demographic considerations, Bellevue’s decline during Dr Pollard’s pastorate could, for example, also have been taken as an indication that the church would stand a better chance of success if it relocated to a majority-white neighbourhood.

On the surface it therefore seems plausible to interpret Bellevue’s commitment to Midtown as a noble and commendable form of resistance to the phenomenon of post-civil rights white flight, which, as numerous scholars have demonstrated, has undoubtedly contributed towards the decline of inner-city neighbourhoods all over the United States.⁴⁵⁷ Mulder’s study of evangelical white flight demonstrates that congregations which withdraw from inner city neighbourhoods relatively late are often those which have a greater sensitivity to the moral implications of urban withdrawal, stronger attachments to their surrounding communities, and are less preoccupied with preserving their ethnic, religious or racial identities. One Chicago-based Reformed Church congregation from Mulder’s study saw “changing neighbourhoods” as a “great opportunity to reach out in many ways”. Rather than “clos[ing] its doors because of the changing complexion of the community,” the church sought to “minister for the many nationalities and races moving into the area” and to “integrate them into the life of the church”.⁴⁵⁸ Churches like these resist relocation for longer because staying in a neighbourhood which has been subjected to a high degree of demographic flux and urban decay is seen as an ethical obligation as well as an opportunity to minister for people from less advantaged racial or ethnic groups. In other words, the moral necessity of being committed to a particular neighbourhood is seen as outweighing the economic or social benefits of suburbanisation. In turn, ‘rather than simply following familiar resources to the suburbs, the church[es] would survive with a different identity that would attract the newly arrived African Americans and any remaining white holdovers’.⁴⁵⁹ Although many such congregations eventually succumbed to demographic change, their progressive principles

⁴⁵⁵ See Dochuk, “Praying for a Wicked City” and Mulder, *Shades of White Flight*.

⁴⁵⁶ Mulder, *Shades of White Flight*, p. 79. Mulder’s discussion of Catholic congregations and their community attachments refers extensively to John McGreevy’s work on the topic: John McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth Century Urban North*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

⁴⁵⁷ See, for example, the seminal monograph by Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*.

⁴⁵⁸ *Acts and Proceedings of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America* (Somerville, NJ: Somerset Press, 1959), p. 96, quoted in Mulder, *Shades of White Flight*, p. 129.

⁴⁵⁹ Mulder, *Shades of White Flight*, p. 139.

and willingness to accommodate neighbourhood change help explain why they relocated on average far later than many other inner-city white churches.

To what extent did the ethics of urban withdrawal or local community attachments play a part in Bellevue's initial commitment to stay in Midtown? Despite Rogers' rhetoric of "God planting us right here in the heart of Memphis," the main priority of the Ten Year Plan was not to minister for Midtown per se. Rather, in keeping with its traditional emphasis on evangelism, it was to expand the church's facilities in order to accommodate its aim of baptising ten thousand people over the next decade. During the early stages of the Ten Year Plan, Rogers did hint that he had a 'desire to become more active in social ministry'.⁴⁶⁰ However, he also 'maintain[ed] his strong belief that evangelism comes first'.⁴⁶¹ Thus, although Bellevue was prepared to expand its social ministry and stay in the inner-city, it was only willing to do so on the condition that the Midtown expansion would enable the church to fulfil the numerical targets set by the Ten Year Plan. Bellevue's leaders were prepared to seek other options if they thought the Midtown expansion would be unable to meet these targets. Similarly, there is little evidence to suggest that Bellevue's initial commitment to Midtown had much to do with community attachments. While Bellevue was in Midtown, the church was focussed predominantly on evangelism and ministering for its own members rather than for the broader community. Unlike the aforementioned Reformed Church congregations in Chicago, community outreach did not have a major role to play in the activities of the church.⁴⁶² When asked about the kinds of attachments Bellevue may have had which could have delayed the relocation, Bellevue layman David Coombs mentioned the high number of elderly members who still lived Midtown, but he had little to say about any other connections the church may have had with the broader community.⁴⁶³ This emphasis on ministering solely for the church's current members severely limited the attachments Bellevue had established with its surrounding community, and made the prospect of relocation more tenable in the eyes of the church's members.

Bellevue's theology and its approach towards racial integration support the notion that ethical considerations or community attachments had little to do with its willingness to stay in Midtown. Bellevue belongs to a theological tradition which tends to place a strong emphasis on individual salvation and eschew the more liberal Social Gospel framework. One symptom of Bellevue's individualistic theological outlook was a lack of a willingness to minister for the broader community as well as for its own members. Bellevue's lack of racial integration further weakened the ties it had with Midtown. As Chapters 1 and 2 demonstrated, during desegregation Bellevue made no attempt to redress its racial imbalance by reaching out to the African American community. As Midtown evolved from being a majority-white to a majority-black neighbourhood, an increasing number of the church's members would therefore begin to reside in other locations. One implication of this was that Bellevue's ties with its community would further weaken, since by the 1980s it was mainly ministering to people in other neighbourhoods. As the church's centenary publication put it,

⁴⁶⁰ Tom Baily Jr., "Midtown farewell finds Bellevue favouring work with Free the Children", *Commercial Appeal*, [date], p. B2.

⁴⁶¹ Ibid.

⁴⁶² This was confirmed by Bellevue layman building committee member David Coombs.

⁴⁶³ Coombs, interview with author.

'many of Bellevue's members had moved to East Memphis or to the suburbs in the 1960s and 1970s, and [by the 1980s] Bellevue was no longer a true "neighbourhood church"'.⁴⁶⁴ Overall, Bellevue's willingness to stay in Midtown at the early stages of the Ten Year Plan was probably more to do with the progress of its land parcel project and the success the church had had ever since Rogers became pastor than it did to do with neighbourhood attachments.

Whatever Bellevue's motives behind staying in Midtown, its plans were eventually scuppered by the barriers in the way of attaining all of the land that it required. Since the necessary land was in a heavily developed area, the church was forced to negotiate individually with landowners who had property on the proposed sites. Whereas many proprietors were willing to offer Bellevue their land for a fair price, others were less eager to give up their assets for anything less than a huge premium. Building committee member David Coombs blamed one particularly manipulative property speculator for ruining the church's plans to stay in Midtown: "We were trying to buy a lot of the property around us. An individual anticipated and saw that that might be going on. So he went and bought an apartment complex which was the one that we needed. And he went and paid about \$250,000 for it. And so several months later, when we came to him to buy it he wanted \$900,000 for it. He said, 'I know you need it, and I'm not selling it for anything less than that'. So it was a pretty expensive as a property, and for buying nothing—we were just going to tear it down!"⁴⁶⁵ The required land was an essential part of Bellevue's Midtown plans, but the church's leaders were unwilling to meet the derisory valuation of the property (Rogers himself referred to the pricing as "highly exorbitant").⁴⁶⁶ The speculator's demands were the final nail in the coffin for Bellevue's hopes of staying in Midtown.

As the rest of this chapter will show, there were numerous demographic and religious forces which contributed towards Bellevue's decision to relocate to an entirely different location in the suburbs, as opposed to one that was still within the inner-city. As Andrew Trundle argues, Bellevue 'certainly had the means, and Dr Rogers certainly had the appeal, to successfully relocate within the city'.⁴⁶⁷ *Where* the church decided to relocate was therefore far more significant than the fact that it needed to move in the first place. Nonetheless, it was the property speculator episode that first triggered a re-evaluation of the Ten Year Plan, and represents the first step in Bellevue's long process of relocation. As soon as it became clear that the Midtown initiative would have to be shelved, Bellevue's building committee began to investigate other possibilities. "We started making trips around the country looking at worship centres the size that we wanted that we could build," Coombs remembers. "And every time we went the church that we looked at had relocated from the original location. And so we started seeing this pattern. When this guy wouldn't sell the building...[Rogers] asked us [the building committee], 'What do you think about relocating?' And we said, 'it sure would be a lot easier to raise money to build something closer to where everyone lives'"⁴⁶⁸ Another report was hastily commissioned by the church, this time to investigate the

⁴⁶⁴ *By His Grace and For His Glory*, p. 240.

⁴⁶⁵ Coombs, interview with author.

⁴⁶⁶ Adrian Rogers, quoted in "Bellevue's Move to Memphis's Suburbs", *Baptist and Reflector*, November 9, 1983, p. 1.

⁴⁶⁷ Trundle, "Doctrine, Demographics, and the Decline of the Southern Baptist Convention", p. 90.

⁴⁶⁸ Coombs, interview with author.

feasibility of moving to a neighbourhood called Germantown, a rapidly growing district on the eastern fringes of the city. The report examined how the area surrounding the proposed site had changed in the ten years between 1970 and 1980, during the height of white flight in Memphis. Its findings demonstrated conclusively that the suburbs had become far more demographically, racially and socially similar to Bellevue's congregation than Midtown currently was. The study noted a dramatic increase in the population of Germantown, made up mostly of whites who had relocated in the wake of busing: the proportion of whites living in the area had risen from 67 % in 1970 to 90 % in 1980.⁴⁶⁹ Meanwhile, young, well-educated adults had become one of the major demographic categories of the area, with a seventeen percent increase in residents between the ages eighteen and thirty-four and an eighteen percent increase in residents with four or more years of college education. The extremely high proportion of whites living in Germantown (compared to white proportion of around 50 % of the total population of Memphis) was an obvious indicator of its demographic "suitability" for Bellevue's new sanctuary. Alongside this racial dimension, the influx of younger, more educated residents into Germantown also reflected changes that had been taking place within the church ever since the beginning of the Rogers pastorate.

The Germantown study's findings soon convinced Rogers and Long Range Planning Committee that a relocation offered the best likelihood of achieving the aims of the Ten Year Plan. Soon after the report was completed, the building committee found a vast, three hundred-acre site close to Germantown, thirteen miles east of Midtown and just outside of the Memphis city limits. The advantages of moving to this site were numerous. The available lot was cheap (at around a million dollars less than the total amount of land required in Midtown) and easy to acquire: "It just fell into our lap," as Coombs put it.⁴⁷⁰ As well as being cheap, easy to attain and demographically appropriate, the site was also far more easily accessible for the majority of Bellevue members. The church claimed that the proposed new location would be closer than the Midtown sanctuary for up seventy percent of the congregation, meaning around sixty percent of the church's members would be within a fifteen-minute drive from the new campus.⁴⁷¹ Additionally, the new site was just yards away from the second longest interstate highway in the country, I40, which snaked around the north-eastern perimeter of the city before arriving at the Hernando de Soto Bridge near Downtown, while continuing its long journey towards California.⁴⁷² The site's proximity to I40 would make it easier for people commuting from nearby suburbs or counties to access the church; it also symbolised Bellevue's transformation from a "neighbourhood church" in the heart of the inner-city to a fully-fledged "regional church" which was able to attract worshippers from a broad catchment area. Lastly, the sheer size of the proposed land tract

⁴⁶⁹ "Germantown Parkway Area Study: Background Report". Memphis and Shelby County Office of Planning and Development, BBT – Germantown Parkway Area folder, DMCF.

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁷¹ "Claiming Our Canaan: A Special Message From Our Pastor", *Bellevue Baptist Church Messenger*, [unknown date], BBT – Canaan Move Brochures/Messengers – Special folder, DMCF.

⁴⁷² Bellevue's nearness to a major interstate highway is another feature which the church shares with other megachurches, as Karnes et al's study demonstrates. Karnes et al, "Mighty Fortresses", p. 266.

would mean it would comfortably accommodate 'all future plans for [the] expansion of church facilities and that space would never be an obstacle to growth again'.⁴⁷³

While the idea was still at the consultation stage, Bellevue acquired an option on the proposed site, which reserved the land for if the church officially approved of the relocation. By this stage Rogers "already had a group of people on board...He waited until all of his advisors were on board behind the scenes before he ever presented anything publically".⁴⁷⁴ Before the proposal to relocate was officially aired to the congregation, Rogers met with church's deacons and building committee, and "After praying about it everybody concurred".⁴⁷⁵ All that was left to do was for Rogers to take the recommendation to the church. The question over whether to stay in Midtown or relocate would be put to a vote amongst Bellevue's members. 'About 4,000 people packed into the sanctuary' on Sunday, October 30, 1983 'to hear Pastor Rogers explain the details'.⁴⁷⁶ As a further demonstration of the lack of community attachments Bellevue's members appeared to have to Midtown during the 1980s, the proposal to relocate was approved by a landslide. Of a total of around two thousand voters, less than ten voted against the relocation plans. Within a few short months of the abandonment of the Midtown plans, Bellevue had found a promising new site for the expansion and had won a resounding congregational mandate to begin the relocation. Now the church was ready to make its first steps towards "claiming its Canaan".

"Claiming our Canaan"

Once the relocation had been approved, the development of the programme progressed quickly. Between December 1983 and January 1984 Bellevue had managed to raise \$3.1 million through donations during special fundraising services. In January 1985, after a morning service when members 'viewed a visual presentation' of the designs, the congregation 'unanimously approved' the specific 'conceptual plans' for the new facility in Cordova.⁴⁷⁷ But despite these encouraging developments, Bellevue was still in desperate need of extra money to fund the programme. There was still the money to come from the sale of the old facility, but the church had yet to find a buyer for the property and it was difficult to gauge how much it could be sold for. In order to pay for the enormous, three-hundred-acre new campus—complete with a 7,000 seat sanctuary and 3,000 space car park—Bellevue estimated that it would need to raise up to \$18 million (by the end of the building programme the total cost of the relocation would add up to \$34 million, although the eventual sale of the old campus contributed towards these costs). Being wary of the financial challenges that lay ahead of the church, Rogers appealed to his congregation in the form of an open letter to all Bellevue members in February 1984: 'This campaign is to help us raise construction money so we may build without placing our church into financial bondage. Our desire and plan is to ask you and every other family unit of our church to prayerfully consider making an over and above

⁴⁷³ Greer, "Bellevue Baptist Church", p. 14.

⁴⁷⁴ Ediston, interview with author.

⁴⁷⁵ Coombs, interview with author.

⁴⁷⁶ *By His Grace*, p. 241.

⁴⁷⁷ "Chronological Review of Canaan", church document, BBT – Chronological Review of Canaan folder, DMCf.

sacrificial, financial commitment,’ Rogers pleaded.⁴⁷⁸ As well as introducing the fundraising initiative, Rogers’ letter was also one of the first occasions where the religious motifs of Bellevue’s relocation were publically presented. ‘I firmly believe that God is leading us in our move to Canaan...I am calling the family units of our church to fervent prayer for the “Victory in Jesus” campaign’.⁴⁷⁹ “Claiming our Canaan” and “Victory in Jesus” would become central themes of Bellevue’s fundraising initiative and the run-up to its relocation. The slogans would be used frequently in church literature, campaigns, and sermons when referring to the move to Cordova. They provided the church with a spiritual framework for the relocation which, in the context of this chapter, sheds light on the nature and meanings of post-war evangelical white flight.

The complex ways in which churches in the US applied spiritual meanings and discourses to their experiences of white flight illustrates how religious white flight differed – in often significant ways – to secular instances of the phenomenon. Nonetheless, the question of how Protestantism has influenced the character and meanings of white flight has received surprisingly little attention within the fields of post-war urban and evangelical history. As suggested by Darren Dochuk, ‘such a gap in historical dialogue is curious considering the degree to which Protestant hegemony continued to shape the urban experience in the postwar period’.⁴⁸⁰ Even Mark T. Mulder’s monograph about evangelical white flight in the South Side of Chicago places a far greater emphasis on causes than it does on the meanings and spiritual implications of white withdrawal.⁴⁸¹ To date, one of the few studies of ‘how urban change...acquired religious significance’ in the Protestant context is Dochuk’s analysis of an evangelical church in Detroit.⁴⁸² As well as discussing the causes of Highland Park Baptist Church’s relocation to the Detroit suburbs, Dochuk sought to understand how ‘patterns of ritual, language and theology’ were constructed in response to ‘urban change’.⁴⁸³ As the following paragraphs will show, Bellevue’s “Victory in Jesus” and “Claiming our Canaan” themes ascribed religious meanings to the relocation and provided distinctly evangelical responses to the ethics of urban withdrawal. The former term was the name given to Bellevue’s fundraising initiative; it was part of the triumphalist language that permeated Bellevue’s justification for the relocation, and was symptomatic of the church’s devotion to the theological principle of individual soul saving. Meanwhile, the notion of “Claiming our Canaan” imbued the physical site of the new campus with spiritual significance, which in turn provided an epic narrative and a further rationale for the relocation.

There are many overlaps between the cultural, historical and theological identities of Bellevue and those of Dochuk’s case study, Highland Park Baptist Church (HPBC) in Detroit. Both churches began as inner-city congregations residing in neighbourhoods which, during

⁴⁷⁸ Adrian Rogers, letter to Bellevue members, February 1, 1985, BBT – Fund Raising – VIJ #1 March 1985 folder, DMCF.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁰ Dochuk, “Praying for a Wicked City”, p. 168.

⁴⁸¹ This is a point I elaborate on in my review of Mulder’s *Shades of White Flight*. See Laurence Connell, “Mark T. Mulder: *Shades of White Flight: Evangelical Congregations and Urban Departure* [review]”, *Review of Religious Research*, Vol. 57, No. 2 (2015), accessed September 20, 2015, DOI: 10.1007/s13644-015-0235-0.

⁴⁸² Dochuk, “Praying for a Wicked City”, p. 168.

⁴⁸³ Ibid.

the first half of the twentieth century, were overwhelmingly white and reasonably prosperous. (This was particularly the case of Highland Park, which during its heyday in the 1910s and 1920s ‘established itself as one of the most desirable places to live in the whole metropolitan Detroit area’).⁴⁸⁴ Both neighbourhoods were then subjected to a dramatic wave of post-war demographic change which eventually transformed Midtown Memphis and Highland Park into majority-black communities and, thanks to dwindling economic resources, facilitated sharp rises in poverty, unemployment and crime. For reasons that were related to this demographic change and economic decline, both Bellevue and HPBC eventually withdrew from their original locations to minister in majority-white suburban neighbourhoods (although HPBC did so far sooner than Bellevue – 1966 compared with 1989). As a symptom of the shifting socioeconomic dynamics of their respective cities, the class compositions of Bellevue and HPBC’s congregations evolved over time, but both hovered around the middle class stratum for much if not all of the second half of the twentieth century. Lastly, the two congregations shared a fundamentalist Baptist theology which played a crucial role in determining their responses to urban change and relocation.

Despite these numerous similarities, however, there was a big difference between the connections Bellevue and HPBC had with their respective communities. This in turn created radically different congregational reactions to the prospect of urban withdrawal, which was evident in how each church imbued its relocation with religious significance and how they interpreted urban withdrawal. Although HPBC shared with Bellevue a ‘strict adherence to an inerrant view of scripture’ and a strong emphasis on evangelism, it also—somewhat unusually for a white fundamentalist church—‘promoted an irenic form of religiosity that easily corresponded with the needs, sensibilities, and opportunities afforded by the community’.⁴⁸⁵ HPBC’s congregational culture ‘placed more emphasis on Keswick holiness and revivalist teachings which called for a broader engagement with community than on the more dogmatic and potentially (though not necessarily) separatist emphasis of premillennialism’.⁴⁸⁶ In contrast to Bellevue, which, as already mentioned, had a strong emphasis on ministering for its own members while it was in Midtown, HPBC’s ‘ongoing commitment to mass revivalism in the community was as much about maintaining a collective, public presence in Highland Park as it was about saving individual souls’.⁴⁸⁷ Instances of HPBC’s intimate engagement with its surrounding community included a ministry which taught newly-arrived immigrants how to be “American,” hospital visits, and ‘neighbourhood and child evangelism’.⁴⁸⁸ Though HPBC often displayed prejudice in terms of its treatment of African Americans—‘blacks shaped HPBC culture only insofar as they were considered degenerate and in desperate need of the gospel’—there was a genuine willingness, during the early stages of Highland Park’s demographic transformation, to minister for newcomers of all racial and ethnic backgrounds. In other words, sincere attempts were made to adapt to neighbourhood changes and to ‘improve the church’s standing in the

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid, p. 170.

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid, p. 171.

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid, p. 172.

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid.

community'.⁴⁸⁹ This was most evident in the foundation of its Promotional Committee in 1953, which was tasked with keeping 'the city "aware of the program and activities" of HPBC' through bulletins and newspaper announcements.⁴⁹⁰ By 1960, the funding allocated to its Promotional Committee even outweighed the amount assigned to the Evangelization Committee.

Despite these attempts to minister for its rapidly transforming neighbourhood, HPBC ultimately failed to offer 'any kind of response to the changing racial dynamics of Highland Park,' and 'by the late 1950s, this paralysis left [the church] with only one option: relocation'.⁴⁹¹ But HPBC's relocation would not have been possible without a 'deep ideological transformation' which shifted the church's emphasis from a strong community conscience and towards the notion that 'Detroit and Highland Park were already lost causes'.⁴⁹² At a crucial time during the late 1950s, when the socioeconomic changes in Highland Park were starting to overwhelm the church, HPBC appointed Lehman Strauss as senior pastor. Strauss instilled in his congregation an 'apocalyptic fear' of Highland Park's apparent degeneration, and eventually the church appeared ready to 'relinquish' what it saw as its 'sacred position and mandate in Highland Park'.⁴⁹³ But before, during and after the process, HPBC's relocation was haunted by the notion that in withdrawing from the inner-city the church had spiritually abandoned Highland Park. There was a lingering guilt about leaving a neighbourhood in desperate need of social ministry for the comfortable but 'potentially numbing psychological, moral and spiritual effects of life in the suburbs'.⁴⁹⁴ Resistance to the relocation existed at every level of the church hierarchy, and persisted long after it had taken place. Many individual members of the congregation disapproved of the relocation, arguing community ministries should take priority over all other considerations. Strauss's successor, Robert McMillan, even resigned over the issue of the relocation, but not before bemoaning HPBC 'for abandoning its commitment to community' in one of the church's weekly bulletins.⁴⁹⁵ Such was the intensity of the moral furore surrounding the relocation that its tremors could still be felt a whole generation later. During a missions conference held at the church in 1993, HPBC's incumbent pastor Leonard Crowley suggested that 'by hiding for so long from the communities around them...churches like HPBC had simply "lost them"'.⁴⁹⁶

The ethics of urban withdrawal were scrutinised heavily in the local press during the run-up to Bellevue's relocation. It seemed as though Bellevue's status as the largest white church in the region had magnified the spiritual and moral ramifications of the move. The two issues which dominated media coverage of the event were the moral problem of urban withdrawal and—unsurprisingly given the local context—race. Shortly after the relocation was decided upon, one newspaper asked Dr Mark Matheny for his opinion on the move. Matheny was senior pastor at Madison Heights United Methodist Church, just a few blocks

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid, p. 175.

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁹¹ Ibid, p. 178.

⁴⁹² Ibid, p. 180.

⁴⁹³ Ibid, p. 179.

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid, p. 184.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid, p. 180.

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid, p. 167.

from Bellevue. He was also president of the Memphis Ministers Association, one of the more liberal religious groups in the city. His views on Bellevue's relocation reflected the progressive credentials of the organisation he was in charge of. 'Bellevue's move is going to force churches that remain in the shadow of Memphis's poverty to reassess how they stand on social ministry,' he suggested.⁴⁹⁷ "The major issue is, does the church exist primarily for itself and its members or those of its persuasion, or for the whole community?"⁴⁹⁸ In an interview for the same article, Rogers responded by arguing, "We're not trying to run away from anybody". He suggested the move to Cordova would motivate the church to increase its social ministry. "I've had in my heart an increasing desire to minister in this way," he claimed. "I'm hoping as we move and get settled in we will have a base for local mission and social work, and worldwide mission and social work".⁴⁹⁹ Rogers cited his interest in partnering his church with a local Free the Children charity initiative as one example of how Bellevue sought to increase its social ministry in the future. Moreover, Rogers argued, the church already "spend[s] an incredible amount of money on helping people in need, in food, in clothing, in rent, in medicine..." Here Rogers was referring to an annual \$1.5 million budget 'for causes outside the church and community — "for education, housing, [and] mission work"'.⁵⁰⁰ But Rogers did deem it necessary to issue a word of caution to those tempted to place too high an emphasis on social ministry: "I think those of us who are firm believers in the faith...we almost sometimes get negative to social work because some who are in it use it as a substitute for the gospel of Christ, and I think that's tragic". Overall, Rogers believed it was not about "either/or, it's both". Nonetheless, 'while expressing a desire to become more active in social ministry... [Rogers] maintain[ed] his strong belief that evangelism comes first'.⁵⁰¹

Despite Rogers insistence that social ministry played a part in the past, present and future of Bellevue's activities, it is evident that these ministries were not of the kind which forged strong connections with the surrounding community. Like most Protestant churches, irrespective of theological or denominational orientation, social ministry did have a role to play at the church. But perhaps the more pertinent question is not whether Bellevue *participated* in social ministry per se, but what its *priorities* were. As Rogers would doubtless concede, Bellevue had always emphasised personal salvation over social ministry, even if social ministry did over time play a role at the church. Unlike HPBC, which during the 1950s was actually *more* concerned with social ministry than it was with any other initiative, there was never any doubt about what would take precedence at Bellevue. These contrasting approaches towards social ministry are illustrative of the degrees of strength of Bellevue and HPBC's connections with their surrounding neighbourhoods. As demonstrated earlier, the principle purpose of Bellevue's Ten Year Plan was to enlarge the church so that its facilities could accommodate an extra ten thousand members. This was the non-negotiable criterion which Bellevue's leaders were not willing to compromise on, and were prepared to abandon the Midtown campus for the sake of. Unlike at HPBC, where resistance permeated every layer of the church hierarchy, there is no evidence to suggest that there was anything other than

⁴⁹⁷ Tom Baily Jr, "Midtown farewell".

⁴⁹⁸ Mark Matheny, quoted in *ibid.*

⁴⁹⁹ Adrian Rogers, quoted in *ibid.*

⁵⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰¹ *Ibid.*

extremely minor opposition to the relocation at Bellevue. Historically, Bellevue laypeople had shown themselves to be more than capable of organised dissent, as the church split of 1960 had shown. But if the vote cast in 1983 is any indicator of members' attitudes towards the relocation, then Bellevue as a whole was overwhelmingly in favour of the move. This suggests that sustaining community connections was a relatively low priority in comparison to the agenda of individual soul saving and the other benefits of moving to the suburbs. Bellevue may have committed to increasing its social ministry, but it is clear that the locale of Midtown was not in itself an essential component of these plans.

Bellevue's strong emphasis on individual soul saving meant there was not necessarily a contradiction between its ethical framework as a church and its decision to withdraw from an economically impoverished neighbourhood. For HPBC in Detroit, serving the specific locality of Highland Park was clearly an essential component of its ministerial identity; hence, each stage of the church's relocation was plagued by a sense of moral crisis. Meanwhile, the example of Madison Heights United Methodist Church in Memphis is indicative of how liberal congregations which prioritised social ministry displayed a greater sensitivity to the ethics of urban withdrawal, which in turn resulted in a stronger commitment towards their original neighbourhoods. It is no coincidence that Matheny's predominantly-white church stayed in its Midtown location a few blocks from Bellevue Avenue until 1994 when, as a result of its failure to adapt to demographic change, the church was forced to shut down.⁵⁰² Madison Heights' fate was part of a nationwide pattern of liberal Protestant churches displaying greater effort to adapt to neighbourhood change than their more evangelist-oriented coreligionists.⁵⁰³ It was the near-impossibility of reconciling the social gospel ethical framework with the moral implications of urban withdrawal which kept so many white, liberal Protestant congregations in inner-city neighbourhoods for so long. Meanwhile, although Bellevue was relatively late to relocate, the reason for its deferment was not because of ethical considerations; rather, it was because Bellevue's exceptional megachurch status had enabled it to continue to grow despite the changing racial and socioeconomic circumstances of the neighbourhood that surrounded it. Once it became clear that Bellevue could tenably achieve better growth elsewhere, its ethical and theological worldview easily accommodated such a decision. As argued by Dochuk, 'Protestants, like their Catholic and Jewish counterparts, understood and responded to the urban crisis in ways that were consistent with the spiritual outlook of their religious institutions'.⁵⁰⁴

For Bellevue, then, the moral shortcomings of abandoning Midtown were easily outweighed by the moral benefits of converting thousands of more souls by moving to a larger

⁵⁰² Madison Heights was effectively a victim of the demographic forces described throughout this chapter. According to a former laywoman, Madison Heights UMC closed because many of its members gradually moved away to other neighbourhoods and it had started to become unsustainable to continue ministering in a large, dilapidated building with so few members. Vance Lauderdale, interview with Mary Evelyn Goodwin, "Lost in Memphis: Madison Heights Methodist Church—An Update", *Memphis: The City Magazine*, February 6, 2012, accessed April 10, 2016, <http://memphismagazine.com/ask-vance/lost-memphis-madison-heights-methodist-church-an-update/>.

⁵⁰³ Mulder had a similar finding in his case study of Chicago congregations. Mulder, *Shades of White Flight*.

⁵⁰⁴ Dochuk, "'Praying for a Wicked City'", p. 185.

campus outside of Midtown. As Rogers argued in a press release for the relocation, 'we must recognize that in order to maintain a long-term ministry, we must have buildings to operate out of. The building is a tool to help us reach people and teach them the Word of God...we must never take our eyes off the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is for this reason that we exist'.⁵⁰⁵ This assumption, combined with a theological worldview which stressed individualism and a massive mandate for relocation, helped create a religious environment for relocation which was radically different to HPBC's atmosphere of ambivalence. The tone of Bellevue's relocation was celebratory and even triumphalist throughout the process of the relocation. The prospect of converting ten thousand new souls was heralded as a "Victory in Jesus" (as was the successful fundraising ministry with the same name, which raised over \$53 million from church members between 1983 and 2001); meanwhile, referring to the ancient holy country roughly encompassing present-day Syria, Jordan and Israel, the new site in Cordova was, during the build-up to the move, presented to the congregation as Bellevue's very own Promised Land.

This kind of language permeated the congregational culture of the church throughout the build-up to the relocation. On March 24, 1985, the church arranged a banquet—the largest congregational dinner in the history of the church—as the 'climax of the' "Victory in Jesus" fundraising campaign.⁵⁰⁶ The dinner provided members with the opportunity to make further financial commitments to the programme. Two years later the congregation's anticipation was reaching fever pitch, as building on the Cordova site was finally ready to commence. 'Bellevue Baptist Church will cross its Jordan and take its first step into Canaan during a dramatic and history-making ground-breaking,' declared the church bulletin on July 19, 1987.⁵⁰⁷ Echoing what his predecessor pastor Lee had done during the ground-breaking of the latest Midtown sanctuary almost forty years earlier, Rogers was now ready to dig the first spades of earth of what would eventually become the new home of Bellevue. However, being no stranger to making a show, Rogers wanted Bellevue's latest ground-breaking to be more than simply a traditional ceremony; he wanted to do justice to the biblical significance that had been ascribed to the relocation. Lee's opening of the current sanctuary in November 1949 was itself a major Midtown event, attracting over a thousand people to North Bellevue Avenue on an autumnal evening; but it would pale in comparison to the scale and pyrotechnics of what Rogers had planned in Cordova. The event would attract three thousand people, feature '300 to 400 musicians and singers, [and have] a full worship service'.⁵⁰⁸ The ground-breaking would also be attended by distinguished members of Memphis's (white) establishment, including Richard Hackett, the last white person to be elected city mayor.

The centrepiece of the ceremony was a retelling of the Twelve Spies, a *Book of Numbers* parable about the territory God had allocated for the Promised Land. In the story, God promised Abraham that there would be a nation which would emerge for his son, Isaac. God

⁵⁰⁵ Adrian Rogers, "Sharing the Joy: Press Release", church press release, BBT – Claiming Our Canaan folder, DMCF.

⁵⁰⁶ "All-church Banquet to Be Sunday at Convention Center", *Bellevue Baptist Church Messenger*, March 21, 1985, BBT – Claiming Our Canaan folder, DMCF.

⁵⁰⁷ "Bellevue to Step Into Canaan," *Bellevue Baptist Church Messenger*, July 16, 1987, BBT – Claiming Our Canaan folder, DMCF.

⁵⁰⁸ Penni Crabtree, "Bellevue Baptists to break new ground," *The Commercial Appeal*, July 18, 1987.

allocated the territory of Canaan, which twelve “spies” would survey to assess its suitability for establishing a nation. Although ten of these spies came back with a negative assessment, and doubted the ability of God to deliver on his promise, two spies—Joshua and Caleb—had faith in His programme and were therefore the only two allowed to enter the Promised Land. At the ground-breaking a large stage was erected where costumed actors would play out the story. There were also ‘12-foot sign[s] with a giant on,’ each of which was labelled with a negative characteristic such as “hate,” “laziness” and “pride”.⁵⁰⁹ These giants represented the first ten spies’ negative assessment of the land. Each negative characteristic had a corresponding virtue, such as “joy,” “peace” and “love,” which would be used to overcome the negative assessment of the land. Then the ‘pastor announced that the ground-breaking was ready to begin. A fanfare, played by 110 trumpets, began. Canon fire erupted’.⁵¹⁰ Shortly afterwards, the most dramatic event of the ceremony took place: ‘Four pieces of heavy equipment, led by a bulldozer, appeared from the trees and headed towards the giants. The bulldozer lowered its blade, dug into the ground in front of the platform and knocked over the ten giants to the applause of the congregation’.⁵¹¹ Bellevue’s grandiose ground-breaking was clearly a product of Rogers’ keenness for “making a show” during important events. Its style was of the same ilk as the *Singing Christmas Tree* annual show, which was also a Rogers brainchild. Rogers’ talent for fusing evangelism with novel and entertaining shows was undoubtedly one of the reasons why Bellevue thrived during his pastorate. Although Rogers never steered clear from his focus on preaching the Gospel, he was also not afraid to innovate to attract new members.⁵¹² His shows appealed to baby-boomer audiences who, having grown up with television, were more receptive to spectacles.

Bellevue laypeople first entered the new sanctuary on the weekend of November 18, 1989, during an open house on the Saturday and then the first Sunday service the next day. Even to Bellevue members, who were no stranger to large-scale buildings, the new facility

⁵⁰⁹ “Bellevue Enters Its Canaan,” *Bellevue Baptist Church Messenger*, July 23, 1987, p. 3, BBT – Claiming Our Canaan folder, DMCF.

⁵¹⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹¹ Ibid.

⁵¹² The method of using performances as a way of attracting new members has been recognised as one of the defining features of “new paradigm” churches, which openly embrace a market-oriented model of church growth. Part of this involves maintaining the content of religion but adjusting the style in order to appeal to white, middle class baby-boomers who would otherwise feel intimidated or marginalised by the features of “traditional” evangelicalism. Keith Roberts and David Yamane say of such a target market, ‘Of course this is...a population that seeks the novel and the innovative, so spontaneity prevails over ritual and contemplation; the services are often designed to surprise and intrigue attendees. Baby boomers generally do not cope with boredom patiently. Innovation is the name of the game. Drama is often employed as a major element’. Although the core product of Bellevue’s religious culture—its sermons—have never departed from the charismatic but traditionally-evangelistic style perfected by pastor Lee, Rogers’ willingness to introduce shows and performances like the *Singing Christmas Tree* and the ground-breaking ceremony was nonetheless part of this market-oriented approach towards attracting worshippers from outside the traditional white working class base of Southern Baptist religiosity. Keith A. Roberts and David Yamane, *Religion in Sociological Perspective*, (London: Sage Publications, 2012), p. 210; see also Kimon Howard Sargeant, *Seeker Churches. Promoting Traditional Religion in a Nontraditional Way*, (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2000).

was an intimidating presence. At the far end of car park large enough to accommodate 3,200 cars was the main entrance of the sanctuary, a huge isosceles triangle supported by seven neoclassical columns and featuring a large cross above a stain glass façade. Engraved just above the columns in large lettering was a quote from Psalm 43:3: “Send out Thy light and Thy Truth”. Once visitors walked inside, they were greeted by the same chandelier that hung at the old facility, another homage to the Midtown campus. The centrepiece of the of three-story building was the new, 7,000-seat worship centre that was fan-shaped like a concert hall rather than rectangular like a traditional church. TV screens on either side of the pulpit were erected to help those on the further rows of seats to see, further contributing towards the concert hall impression of the space. The building also housed a library, bookstore, several classrooms, and administrative offices. The opening weekend of the new sanctuary attracted attention from far beyond the city. In terms of the size of the congregation and now the size of its facilities, Bellevue was now one of the very largest churches in the country.⁵¹³ Considering the cultural and historical significance of Bellevue and the denomination that it belongs to, this represented a regional and even national event of sorts. The highest profile form of recognition came the incumbent president of the United States, who in a letter to the church hoped the church’s ‘new facilities will meet the needs of your growing congregation, allowing a greater number of people from all over the Memphis area to celebrate and reaffirm their love of God’.⁵¹⁴ A newspaper article covering Bellevue’s first Sunday service at the new facility reported that the sanctuary was ‘nearly filled twice’ and that ‘roads going into the 376-acre site to Cordova...were jammed with cars before and after the services’.⁵¹⁵ “It’s a dream come true” one layman rejoiced. “It’s a fresh start for everybody since it’s a new place—a place where people can come and meet the Lord Jesus”.⁵¹⁶

Race, Segregation and Demographics

As well as delving into some of the religious implications of urban withdrawal, this chapter has so far examined two of the most important causes of Bellevue’s relocation: the church’s lack of community connections and its ministerial priority of individual soul conversion (as opposed to social ministry). The third and final factor which helped pave the way for Bellevue’s relocation—which will be the subject of the remainder of this chapter—was the complex issue of the church’s lack of racial integration, and how this related to the socioeconomic and demographic changes that were taking place in Midtown and beyond. The absence of a significant African American presence at Bellevue during the seventies and eighties is a key reason why the church lacked any significant connections to its local neighbourhood, and in turn why the mandate for relocation was so strong. For years prior to when the vote to relocate was cast, Bellevue’s racial composition contrasted with that of the

⁵¹³ At the time of the new facility’s completion, Bellevue was the second largest Baptist church in the US, after First Baptist, Dallas, Texas.

⁵¹⁴ George H. W. Bush, letter to Bellevue Baptist Church, October 17, 1989, BBT – Claiming Our Canaan folder, DMCF.

⁵¹⁵ Michael Kelley, *The Commercial Appeal*, November 20, 1989, p. 1, BBT – Claiming Our Canaan folder, DMCF.

⁵¹⁶ Ibid.

neighbourhood that surrounded it. By the middle of the 1980s Bellevue's Midtown neighbourhood had, in demographic terms, become a reflection of the rest of the inner-city; it was racially mixed, with an increasingly high African American presence. This stood in contrast to Bellevue itself, which was still overwhelmingly white. But if the church had managed to attract a larger number of African Americans to its pews it is likely that there would have been a greater resistance to the church's suburbanisation. Not only would there have been a higher number of members living nearby to the church, but it is also possible that the congregation would have established firmer connections to its surrounding community which could have tied the church to Midtown, or at least the general inner city area. As argued by Andrew Trundle, Bellevue 'certainly had the means, and Dr Rogers certainly had the appeal, to successfully relocate within the city'.⁵¹⁷

What, then, explains Bellevue's lack of racial integration? The following paragraphs show that the manner in which the church acquired its success during the Rogers pastorate contributed towards its lack of integration. The causes of Bellevue's success as a megachurch reduced the likelihood of racial integration taking place and, in the context of Memphis's post-busing landscape of residential segregation, contributed towards the "suburban" constituency of the church towards the end of its time in Midtown. Bellevue's growth under Rogers relied on targeting demographic groups who were more "reachable" than ethnic minorities. The vast majority of these reachable people were whites either living or in the process of moving to the suburbs to the east of Midtown. Additionally, Bellevue's specific brand of doctrinal and even political conservatism—which was itself another key reason why the church became successful in the seventies and eighties—deterred many African Americans and other ethnic minorities in the surrounding area. As part of this analysis of the religious and cultural roots the case study's lack of integration, the remainder of this chapter will also compare Bellevue with other megachurches, demonstrating that congregations with different theological orientations and approaches towards church growth were more likely to have higher levels of integration. It was therefore not the megachurch status of Bellevue which was the main determinant of its lack of integration, but rather its congregational culture and its specific approach towards church growth.

It is not possible to discuss the religious and congregational roots of suburbanisation without first paying attention to the rapid socioeconomic and demographic changes that took place in Memphis, and Bellevue's role in these processes. Although Bellevue's relocation was in large part the result of specifically religious factors, demographic change—along with its associated symptoms—was ultimately a major reason why Bellevue and countless other white evangelical churches like it were forced to contemplate urban withdrawal in the first place. In Memphis and elsewhere, the driving force behind these new demographic arrangements was a socioeconomic system in which race and class stratifications were protected and often accentuated. In the 1970s busing, the federally-authorized technique of racially rebalancing public schools, was met with a white backlash which municipalities, local boosters and Sunbelt industries were complicit towards. As Chapter 2 discussed in detail, the result of this collaboration between white communities, government, and political economy was a two-tier educational, racial and socioeconomic system in Memphis which was split clearly along racial lines. This system manifested itself in Memphis's and Shelby County's demographic

⁵¹⁷ Trundle, "Doctrine, Demographics, and the Decline of the Southern Baptist Convention", p. 90.

arrangements, with the poorer, African American residents predominantly living in urban settings and richer whites living in suburban and rural locations. By the mid-1970s over sixty percent of Memphis was black, but the eastern fringes of the city—home to the private, segregated schools—were becoming strongholds of white, middle class prosperity. The Germantown area, which went from being 67% white in 1970 to 90% white in 1980, was a typical example of Memphis's demographic shifts.⁵¹⁸ No records exist of precisely when Bellevue's own members completed their own relocations, or exactly where they relocated too. But the scale of white withdrawal from the inner-city to the suburbs between 1970 and 1985 all but eradicates the possibility that a significant proportion of the congregation did not in some way mirror what was taking place at a broader level. Moreover, interviews conducted for this thesis have confirmed that starting in the 1970s Bellevue members began to relocate to the suburbs in greater numbers than before.⁵¹⁹

Since post-civil rights residential segregation involved 'resources following whites to the suburbs,' the economic benefits of the Sunbelt boom were felt disproportionately outside of the inner-city.⁵²⁰ Numerous businesses that had been based Downtown mirrored the withdrawal of whites and established new headquarters in Shelby County suburbs. One of the most significant examples of this was when, in 1973, distribution company FedEx moved its global headquarters to Memphis International Airport to the southeast of the city, and followed this shortly afterwards by opening a World Technology Centre in Collierville, an east Memphis suburb. The Technology Centre would bring 2,400 jobs to the area, and symbolised the broadening economic gap between the suburbs and inner-city of Memphis.⁵²¹ As a large, thriving megachurch, Bellevue's decision to abandon the economically struggling Midtown neighbourhood undoubtedly contributed towards the patterns of structural inequality that were being accentuated by industrial development in the suburbs. Irrespective of its level of integration, Bellevue certainly had an important economic presence in Midtown, with its significant financial resources and it being a source of employment for the local workforce. As argued by Kimberly Karnes et al, 'Churches in more modest neighbourhoods' like Midtown Memphis 'have a far greater potential to influence the local community's social service structure' than those that exist in wealthy areas where social provisions are not required.⁵²² Since large churches are likely to 'stimulate local commercial development' and 'greater demand for local police, emergency services, and other infrastructural support,' the economic (not to mention social) effects of urban withdrawal are undoubtedly felt by the communities that have been left behind.⁵²³ Bellevue's complicity with white flight mirrored the nationwide situation with megachurches towards the end of the twentieth century. The same study by Karnes et al demonstrates, for example, that megachurches are most likely to

⁵¹⁸ United States Census Bureau, "Census of Population and Housing: Decennial Censuses".

⁵¹⁹ Bill and Emily Cochran, interview with author; Ediston, interview with author; Coombs, interview with author.

⁵²⁰ Mulder, *Shades of White Flight*, p. 73.

⁵²¹ Indeed, three more major companies would open headquarters in the Collierville area alone. Clay Baily, "Orgill Inc. moving world headquarters to Collierville", *The Commercial Appeal*, October 29, 2015, accessed May 11, 2016, <http://www.commercialappeal.com/business/Orgill-Inc-moving-world-headquarters-to-Collierville-338300212.html>.

⁵²² Karnes et al, "Mighty Fortresses", p. 263.

⁵²³ Ibid.

be 'located in areas with highly-educated, relatively wealthy,' and relatively young populations, just like in Bellevue's Cordova neighbourhood.⁵²⁴ But although the typical environment for a megachurch is well-known, less understood is how the religious features of congregations like Bellevue related to their lack of integration and their decisions to relocate.

Many of the causes of segregation in white evangelical churches are rooted in deeply entrenched historical patterns of racial conflict, prejudice and division. Overcoming these divisions has been extremely difficult, more so than in other contexts of "de facto" segregation. As Nancy T. Wadsworth has demonstrated in her study of the evangelical racial change movement, the first signs of meaningful, nationwide reconciliation did not arrive until the 1990s.⁵²⁵ Path dependency has played a part in white evangelical churches' failure to integrate: decades- and even centuries-old decisions and policies have informed current behaviour and attitudes, even though the political and cultural terrain of the post-civil rights South is drastically different to that of the Jim Crow era. On the other hand, the influence of Jim Crow history on contemporary racial divisions has resulted in a widely accepted but nonetheless fallacious notion that racial segregation in white evangelical churches is inevitable.⁵²⁶ This view has helped obscure the role of agency in determining the extent to which white churches are segregated. But 'if the "relationship between structure and agency is dialectical and history is its synthesis," then any general account of "white flight" must account for...the role of human actors and their day-to-day decisions'.⁵²⁷ As Dochuk suggests, evangelical white flight is seldom 'simply a foregone or inevitable outcome thrust on churches like HPBC by larger, unseen economic and social forces'.⁵²⁸ Indeed, HPBC's withdrawal from the inner-city 'encompassed a ten-year process complete with extensive financial, social and spiritual hardship as well as notable dissension over the motivations and implications of a move to suburbia'.⁵²⁹ Agency can also go a long way towards explaining why churches which have similar theological and cultural characteristics can have radically different approaches towards, and degrees of, integration.

Bellevue made few efforts to reach out to any of the thousands of African Americans who had moved to Midtown while Memphis was slowly desegregating. As detailed in previous chapters, the church had what is referred to as a moderate, "laissez-faire" approach towards attracting African Americans and other ethnic minorities. This meant that the two pastors who served during (Pollard) and after (Rogers) the civil rights movement both openly condemned racism and saw no inherent biblical or moral reason why whites and blacks could

⁵²⁴ Ibid.

⁵²⁵ Wadsworth, *Ambivalent Miracles*.

⁵²⁶ But as argued by Miles Mullin, the late twentieth century reality of religious segregation 'was far from a foregone conclusion. In fact, it might be expected that such systemic inequalities would have been addressed during the 1940s and 1950s as "the vigor of the new evangelicalism" reawakened evangelical concern for society at the same time that African Americans were bringing attention to racial problems through their own efforts'. Miles S. Mullin, "Neoevangelicalism and the Problem of Race in Postwar America", in Hawkins and Sinitiere (eds.), *Christians and the Color Line*, p. 15.

⁵²⁷ Dochuk, "'Praying for a Wicked City'", p. 178. Dochuk's quote is from Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, p. 11.

⁵²⁸ Ibid.

⁵²⁹ Ibid.

not worship alongside one another. But at the same time neither pastor did anything to actively encourage African Americans to join the church, such as running outreach programmes or providing social ministry for poorer African American areas of the city. In the seventies and eighties, the situation at Bellevue mirrored what was happening in the Southern Baptist Convention generally. By this point, most SBC conservatives had conceded that 'race [was] the one issue where progressives [had been] right'.⁵³⁰ But rather than actively engaging with the issue, this new generation of politically active white evangelicals (of who Rogers and layman Ed McAteer are good examples) instead funnelled much of their energies into crusades against "moral issues" such as abortion and women's liberation. Meanwhile, they effectively ignored race and the legacies of Jim Crow segregation.⁵³¹ In other words, 'race stayed "off the table"' at Bellevue during the post-civil rights era, just as it did in the SBC.⁵³² The formation of Bellevue's new political culture therefore helped deflect attention away from the agenda of integration, which in turn slowed down the rate at which racial reconciliation could be achieved. As one laywoman observed, prior to Bellevue's relocation "We were in the inner-city, but we did not have an inner-city ministry".⁵³³ This racially coded language hints at both the lack of integration at the church and also the taken-for-granted assumption that a substantial ethnic minority presence was unlikely be drawn to worship at the church. Without any impetus for racial integration, the notion of moving to a more demographically "appropriate" neighbourhood steadily became more appealing.

Closely connected to this lack of racial integration during the Rogers pastorate was the specific strategies Bellevue used for attracting new members. As a Bellevue layman who used his own church as a case study, Dan Lester Greer's analysis of the "church growth movement" offers an inside account of the methods Bellevue and other megachurches like it used to grow. Greer argues that throughout the Rogers era Bellevue followed the megachurch model of church growth, which he defines as a 'very market-driven philosophy of ministry that is directed toward their [the church's] most reachable group'.⁵³⁴ Essential to this methodology is the homogeneous unit principle, which in the context of church growth posits that the best way of attracting new members is to target people from similar racial, ethnic and social backgrounds. The main assumption of the homogeneous unit principle is that people feel more comfortable mixing with worshippers from similar backgrounds, and are more likely to seek a church which resembles their own demographic and social makeup. Or, as Donald McGavran writes, 'Men like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers'.⁵³⁵ Based on the findings of this thesis and Greer's work, it is uncontroversial to suggest that Bellevue's growth under Rogers has been achieved with the homogeneous unit principle in mind, and by targeting these more "reachable" groups. Bellevue's post-Pollard renaissance entailed attracting people from slightly different age and class profiles, but these were considered far more "reachable" than ethnic minorities, who aside from having

⁵³⁰ Hankins, *Uneasy in Babylon*, p. 243.

⁵³¹ Wadsworth, *Ambivalent Miracles*, p. 52.

⁵³² Ibid.

⁵³³ Celia Sartain, quoted in Balmer, "Churchgoing: Bellevue Baptist Church near Memphis", p. 488.

⁵³⁴ Greer, "Bellevue Baptist Church", p. 53.

⁵³⁵ Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1970), p. 233.

drastically different experiences of race were also likely to practice their faith in different ways. Rogers himself has said that “there’s a naturalness for people to want to congregate with people they’re culturally comfortable with,” suggesting he was at ease using the homogeneous unit principle as a model for church growth.⁵³⁶ His comments also echo those made by pastor Pollard years earlier, when he argued African Americans “are not going to come to your [white] church, they don’t want to come...they want to be with their own people”.⁵³⁷

Via the case study of Bellevue, Greer’s study takes the form of a theological defence of the church growth movement, which some have criticised for placing too great an emphasis on numbers, and for being elitist and even bigoted.⁵³⁸ However, Greer writes, ‘Most megachurch pastors have learned through observations of life and from serious study of the Scriptures that there is nothing wrong or unbiblical about people preferring to spend time with the people who are most like them’. ‘The most effective way to reach a black, inner-city neighbourhood for Christ is to start a new black church with a black pastor rather than insisting that these believers join a large, predominantly white, upper-middle class megachurch in the suburbs,’ he concludes.⁵³⁹ In a decision which shows that Bellevue’s leaders had this exact approach towards ministering for ethnic minorities, in the early 2000s the church even established two new satellite churches in non-white areas of Memphis. According to Bellevue layman David Coombs, these churches were fully funded by Bellevue and emerged out of the church’s recent willingness to minister to some of Memphis’s less affluent neighbourhoods.⁵⁴⁰ The two satellite churches were built in the inner-city, in areas where a majority of blacks or Hispanics resided.⁵⁴¹ Today, Bellevue continues to support these churches by “operating them under the organisational structure of the church,” financially supporting them, and by providing staff.⁵⁴² These initiatives demonstrate that although Bellevue was commendably keen to offer a portion of its resources to poorer and more racially mixed neighbourhoods of the city, racial reconciliation was not considered a viable or realistic option. In other words, the method employed to cater for ethnic minorities did nothing to alleviate the patterns of racial segregation within its own pews (and probably had the opposite effect of accentuating it).

More recent work on megachurches has challenged Greer’s notion that there is a typical megachurch growth model which places racial, social and religious “reachability” at its centre. Scott Thumma and Dave Travis show, for example, that one fifth of all megachurches in the United States have an ethnic minority presence of at least twenty percent, and that megachurches are also often relatively diverse in terms of social class.⁵⁴³ This means

⁵³⁶ Adrian Rogers, quoted in Balmer, “Churchgoing: Bellevue Baptist Church near Memphis”, p. 488.

⁵³⁷ Pollard, interview by May, p. 35.

⁵³⁸ This an observation Greer makes in “Bellevue Baptist Church”, p. 51.

⁵³⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁰ Coombs, interview with author.

⁵⁴¹ Bellevue later established a third satellite congregation in the predominantly-white east side of the city, in-between Midtown and Cordova.

⁵⁴² Ibid.

⁵⁴³ Scott Thumma and Dave Travis, *Beyond Megachurch Myths: What We Can Learn from America’s Largest Churches*, (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2007). Twenty percent is also the proportion Nancy T.

that megachurches—usually defined as a Protestant congregation that has at least two thousand regular attendees—are actually *more* diverse on average in terms of race and social class than smaller congregations, which are usually a reflection solely of the racial makeup of the local area.⁵⁴⁴ Nonetheless, it is apparent that during the eighties and beyond Bellevue was a congregation which, if not representative of the phenomenon of megachurches as a whole, was nonetheless an example of how certain very large congregations have achieved high growth by targeting and appealing to one race whilst simultaneously refraining from reaching out to ethnic minorities. Most of the work carried out on megachurch racial diversity has been completed in the last fifteen years, at least a decade after Bellevue's relocation and the period of this chapter's focus. In the wake of the more concerted racial reconciliation efforts of the 1990s, megachurches did, generally speaking, become more racially diverse at the beginning of the twenty-first century. This was even the case with Bellevue itself which, as the racial uniformity of the Cordova neighbourhood started to show the first signs of fracturing, become slightly more racially mixed during the 2000s.⁵⁴⁵ However, it is also true that even during the height of the racial reconciliation movement, Bellevue's racial composition never came close to matching that of other megachurches. It is therefore clear that whichever stage in the history of the racial reconciliation movement that we examine the church, Bellevue had below average levels of racial integration in comparison with other megachurches.⁵⁴⁶

The reasons Bellevue's growth was so disproportionately white—even during a period when large churches across the nation were becoming increasingly diverse—become clearer when a comparison is made between the religious culture of Shelby County's largest church and other megachurches. Many contemporary megachurches belong to what Kimon Sargeant has referred to as the "seeker church" paradigm.⁵⁴⁷ According to Sargeant's definition, seeker churches 'tailor [their] programs and services to attract people who are not church attenders'.⁵⁴⁸ They aim to appeal to people who are discouraged from joining a congregation

Wadsworth uses as a threshold for a "racially integrated" church in her study of racial reconciliation in evangelical congregations. See Wadsworth, *Ambivalent Miracles*.

⁵⁴⁴ Citing a 2005 study on megachurch racial diversity, Thumma and Travis note that 31 percent of contemporary megachurches claim that their congregation has a minority presence of at least 20 percent (a figure that is even higher than their own findings). Meanwhile, the 'average megachurch had 14 percent of the congregation not representing the majority race'. Perhaps most significantly, 'fifty-five percent of megachurches stated that their congregations were making specific efforts to become intentionally multiethnic'. Bellevue cannot be said to resemble any of these factors, however. Thumma and Travis, *Beyond Megachurch Myths*, p. 140. See Brad Christerson, Michael O. Emerson and Korie L. Edwards, *Against All Odds: The Struggle for Racial Integration in Religious Organisations*, (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

⁵⁴⁵ Since Bellevue has never kept records of the racial composition of its congregation, it is necessary to rely on the oral history to support this claim. When asked about how the racial composition of Bellevue changed over the last thirty years, most interview respondents argued that from around the late 1990s Bellevue started to become slightly more racially mixed.

⁵⁴⁶ This is also an indication of the limitations of the accepted definition of what megachurches are. The broad framework means a huge variety of different worshipping styles, religious cultures and geographical contexts are encompassed within the same definition, meaning it is not always worthwhile comparing two congregations just for the sake of their "megachurch" status.

⁵⁴⁷ Sargeant, *Seeker Churches*.

⁵⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p. 2.

because of the traditional—and often intimidating—worshipping styles of many evangelical churches.⁵⁴⁹ The market they intend to appeal to is often the white, culturally secular baby-boomer generation, but the features of such churches also often have the effect of appealing to entirely different racial and socioeconomic profiles. Moreover, some megachurches actively embrace a ‘vision that states that the church is for all people no matter what race, income, or educational status’.⁵⁵⁰ Seeker churches’ first strategy is to appeal to their target market by making the congregational practices and features more culturally relevant.⁵⁵¹ This openness to adapting congregational culture extends to worshipping style, with 59 percent of megachurches in a 2005 survey claiming that their format had changed either “a lot” or “some”.⁵⁵² Megachurches even display a propensity for being ‘shaped by the larger secular culture’.⁵⁵³ Some seeker churches avoid displaying religious symbols such as crucifixes in their campuses, in order to avoid intimidating the more sensitive worshippers.⁵⁵⁴ In the suburban outskirts of Chicago, the nondenominational Willow Creek Community Church—perhaps the archetypal example of the seeker church paradigm—has a campus in which ‘every aspect of [its] facilities emulates the best of corporate America in quality, design and style. Willow Creek’s aim is to reduce...any cognitive dissonance between the religious realm and the working and shopping realm of suburban middle class Americans’.⁵⁵⁵ These examples show that aim of seeker churches and other megachurches like them is to accommodate aspects of the dominant secular culture of American society into the worshipping culture of the congregation. The purity of such churches’ religious culture is therefore sacrificed for the sake of appealing to audiences which would otherwise be deterred from joining evangelical churches.

As well as an openness to being influenced by modern culture, another central reason why contemporary megachurches are likely to be diverse is doctrine. Although evangelical seeker churches do attempt to retain what they see as the “essence” of their theological framework, members are also ‘often invited to make their own interpretations of the meaning of scripture in their lives’.⁵⁵⁶ With regard to doctrinal issues such as the literal existence of the devil and biblical inerrancy, the proportion of members in megachurches who disagree with the evangelical orthodoxy has been found to be around one sixth of some congregations.⁵⁵⁷ Striking a balance between protecting what a particular church sees as the integral features of evangelical theology on one hand, and tolerating doctrinal deviation on the other, is not easy;

⁵⁴⁹ The seeker church method has interesting overlaps with the findings of Mark Shibley’s study of southern-style evangelicalism in the decidedly non-southern cultural setting of California. Shibley argues that the success of southern evangelicalism outside of its traditional heartland relied on individual churches’ ability to adapt their congregational culture to better suit the more modern, liberal and pluralistic cultural surroundings of its new environment. Shibley, *Resurgent Evangelicalism*.

⁵⁵⁰ Thumma and Travis, *Beyond Megachurch Myths*, p. 136.

⁵⁵¹ Roberts and Yamane, *Religion in Sociological Perspective*, p. 208.

⁵⁵² Thumma and Travis, *Beyond Megachurch Myths*, p. 139.

⁵⁵³ *Ibid*, p. 140.

⁵⁵⁴ Sargeant, *Seeker Churches*, p. 61, quoted in Roberts and Yamane, *Religion in Sociological Perspective*, p. 209.

⁵⁵⁵ Roberts and Yamane, *Religion in Sociological Perspective*, p. 209.

⁵⁵⁶ *Ibid*.

⁵⁵⁷ Thumma and Travis, *Beyond Megachurch Myths*, p. 137-8.

churches that fail to satisfactorily balance these agendas are often perceived as being doctrinally impure or insufficiently “strict” and, as Kelley and others have argued, are likely to lose members.⁵⁵⁸ However, theological diversity has nonetheless been part of a pluralistic approach towards growth at particular megachurches which has resulted in a higher degree of racial and socioeconomic diversity than at other comparable churches.

In contrast to Willow Creek and other members of the seeker paradigm, throughout Bellevue’s post-Pollard revival the church retained its strict adherence to traditional evangelical worshipping culture—including, most importantly, its doctrinal conservatism. As discussed in Chapter 2, Bellevue is a good example of a church that achieved high growth as a direct result of its strict theological conservatism. Rogers sustained Bellevue’s historical commitment to biblical inerrancy, which appealed to the surrounding society’s deeply conservative religious culture. Rogers did display an enthusiasm for diversifying and expanding the church’s activities. He was keen on “making a show” during some of the church’s events, such as at the new campus’s ground breaking or his introduction of the *Singing Christmas Tree* event. These had the effect of attracting the kind of younger members who had been leaving the church ever since the beginning of the Pollard pastorate. Despite this, throughout the Rogers pastorate Bellevue did not show any signs of adopting any other elements which made the seeker paradigm successful; indeed, Bellevue was in actual fact actively hostile towards some of the features of the seeker paradigm. Most obviously, as made clear by Rogers’ participation in the SBC Conservative Resurgence and the Christian Right’s crusade against “secular humanism”, Bellevue would have considered it an affront to its values if it had let its congregational culture be influenced by secular culture. Bellevue’s strict theological inerrantism, combined with its refusal to adapt its congregational culture complement the more secular, globalised and interconnected society that surrounded it, ensured the church was never likely to attract members from disparate denominational, cultural and racial backgrounds. Instead, Bellevue’s growth was about attracting audiences from a demographically narrow but numerically high band of core worshippers who were attracted to Bellevue precisely *because* of its strict doctrinal conservatism and hostility towards secular culture.⁵⁵⁹ Throughout much of the second half of the twentieth century, this lack of diversity mattered less in Memphis than it did in other geographical contexts; this was because of the high concentration of conservative whites in the city and the surrounding area, even during the city’s post-civil rights demographic transformation. However, as the twentieth century drew to a close, and whites continued to move out of urban counties like Shelby, Southern Baptist congregations in or around Memphis did start to experience the negative effects of their failure to attract ethnic minorities.⁵⁶⁰

While other models such as the seeker paradigm achieved growth by being more tolerant of cultural and doctrinal diversity, Bellevue’s theological and political conservatism was undoubtedly one of the reasons why the church thrived during the Rogers pastorate. Academic studies by scholars such as Dean Kelley and Finke and Stark have confirmed that

⁵⁵⁸ See Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches are Growing*.

⁵⁵⁹ This is a core constituency that Trundle acknowledges in his study of SBC demographics in Shelby County. Trundle, “Doctrine, Demographics, and the Decline of the Southern Baptist Convention”.

⁵⁶⁰ As argued by Trundle, “Doctrine, Demographics, and the Decline of the Southern Baptist Convention”.

while their more liberal counterparts have declined, conservative churches' more uncompromising approaches have inspired far greater loyalty which helped congregations like Bellevue thrive.⁵⁶¹ Meanwhile, Bellevue layman Dan Greer himself argues that his church's 'conservative position has definitely influenced church growth at the local level'.⁵⁶² But evidence also suggests that Bellevue's brand of theological conservatism also had the side-effect of marginalising African Americans from the congregation. As discussed in Chapter 2, one of the main reasons for the racial divisions in American evangelicalism is the radically different approaches towards inequality and social ministry that black and white congregations practice. Whereas African American Protestants are often theologically moderate or liberal and tend to practice a form of social gospel ministry, white evangelicals are usually more inclined to be theologically conservative and to prioritise individual soul saving ahead of social ministry. The main implication of this division is that black evangelicals are far more likely to prescribe social or structural interventions against inequality, while white evangelicals typically maintain that converting souls should be the ministerial priority of a church.

Historians Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith have demonstrated that these theological differences have, throughout post-war American history, acted as a formidable barrier in the way of the integration of white and black evangelicals. The reason for this, they conclude, is that white evangelicals' theology continues to mould their racial worldview, to the extent that they often deny that racial discrimination is a real issue. Perceiving inequality in entirely individualistic terms, many white evangelicals interviewed for Emerson and Smith's study either stated that the plight of African Americans is down to insufficient leadership, or suggested the problem was more a media construction than a reality. The root cause of these attitudes was not racism per se but the internalisation of a theological framework which does not account for or even perceive structural inequality.⁵⁶³ In the context of southern cities like Memphis, the divisions caused by these theological incompatibilities are particularly severe. This made it far easier for churches like Bellevue to attract whites than it would have been to attract people from ethnicities which tended to practice more liberal forms of the religion. The relationship between race and theology in the post-civil rights South therefore undoubtedly effected the extent to which Bellevue integrated during the Pollard pastorate and beyond.

As well as understanding the appeal of Bellevue's conservative theology, Dan Greer is also sensitive to the magnetism of the church's political conservatism:

'The national revival of conservative thinking in America [during the 1980s] ...positively affected churches like Bellevue [because] all the things that became popular among the majority of Americans concerning social and moral issues, Bellevue had stood for all along. When people in our area started looking for a conservative church that was very patriotic and committed to the family, we were there to meet those needs'.⁵⁶⁴

⁵⁶¹ Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*.

⁵⁶² Greer, "Bellevue Baptist Church," p. 19.

⁵⁶³ Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*.

⁵⁶⁴ Greer, "Bellevue Baptist Church," p. 15.

As an example, Greer attributes the ‘very measurable attendance increase’ that occurred at Bellevue during the early 1990s to the ‘the national debate on moral values [which was] gaining momentum’ during the first Gulf War.⁵⁶⁵ The creation of Bellevue’s political culture which Greer describes and which had existed at the church since the early 1980s was also likely to have contributed towards the marginalisation of African Americans from the church. As a demographic that was far more likely to vote Democrat than Republican in general elections, the staunch political conservatism of Bellevue during the 1980s was incompatible with the political orientations of many African Americans.⁵⁶⁶ ‘The majority of Americans...are terribly concerned about the crime and violence they see every night on the news,’ argues Greer.⁵⁶⁷ However unintentionally, this sentiment echoes the language of Republican leaders such as Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan, who frequently used coded references to African American criminality to appeal to disaffected working and middle class whites during general elections.⁵⁶⁸ Greer’s allusion to the ‘majority of Americans’ is indeed reminiscent Nixon’s Silent Majority, a “colour-blind” discourse designed to mobilise middle class whites behind a strategy aimed at protecting white privilege in southern suburbs just like Cordova.⁵⁶⁹ As mentioned earlier, Bellevue’s political culture—combined with its individualistic theological orientation—were features that were naturally compatible with the discourse of meritocratic prosperity that was found in Memphis’s suburbs in the era of busing.⁵⁷⁰ By embracing a form of politics which was, however indirectly, antagonistic towards African Americans, Bellevue further reduced the likelihood of racial reconciliation. The gap that already existed between

⁵⁶⁵ Ibid. It is, of course, very difficult to empirically determine exactly why, during a certain period, a church achieves particularly high levels of growth, but Bellevue indeed experienced an intense period of growth shortly after moving to Cordova. *The Commercial Appeal* reported that after relocation Bellevue was ‘attracting about 50 members a week, a rate about 50 percent higher than at its former location’. This is likely to be the result of the interest surrounding the new facility as much as it was about a nationwide revival in conservative values. However, Greer’s claim at the very least sheds light on a Bellevue layman’s interpretation of the link between the church’s conservatism and its growth. Tom Baily Jr, “New site boosts Bellevue growth rate,” *The Commercial Appeal*, March 20, 1990, p. 3, BBT – Claiming Our Canaan folder, DMCF.

⁵⁶⁶ As argued by the associate director of the Pew Research Center in a recent interview with *Christianity Today*, “It’s definitely true that in many ways, white evangelicals and black Protestants or black evangelicals, or evangelicals from other racial and ethnic minorities have a lot in common. But when it comes to politics, the data show that they are really at totally opposite ends of the spectrum.” Greg Smith, in Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra, “8 Charts on Which Evangelicals Will (and Won’t) Vote Trump on Super Tuesday,” *Christianity Today*, February 29, 2016, accessed October 31, 2016, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2016/february/8-charts-evangelicals-vote-donald-trump-super-tuesday.html>.

⁵⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 15- 16.

⁵⁶⁸ As argued by Michelle Alexander in her study of mass incarceration in the age of colour-blindness, Reagan ‘built on the success of earlier conservatives who developed a strategy of exploiting racial hostility or resentment for political gain without making explicit reference to race’. This was achieved by employing racially coded references to “welfare queens” and “criminal predators,” in order to appeal to ‘working class whites who felt betrayed by the Democratic Party’s embrace of the civil rights agenda’. Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, (New York: The New Press, 2010), p. 48.

⁵⁶⁹ See Lassiter, *The Silent Majority*.

⁵⁷⁰ Ibid.

white and black religious cultures—which consisted of a variety of different components, including theology and worshipping style—was thus accentuated by the political culture created at Bellevue during the critical period of the 1980s.

Lastly, this chapter's contention that Bellevue's theological and political conservatism deterred African Americans from joining is supported by research conducted on black SBC membership in Bellevue's native county. In his attempt to explain why the membership of the SBC in Shelby County, Tennessee has been declining since the late 1990s, Andrew Trundle argues that the combination of changing demographics and the SBC's doctrinal conservatism have been to blame.⁵⁷¹ To begin with, the proportion of the population of the county that was African American had risen from 44% in 1990 to 49% in 2000.⁵⁷² During that period the black population increased slightly, while the white population decreased by around twenty thousand. And since African Americans are far less likely to worship at SBC congregations than whites, this increase in the black population of five percent helps explain why the denomination has declined. However, Trundle argues that another reason why the SBC has been declining in Shelby County is the conservative doctrine of SBC churches. Trundle found that several churches in the county had decided to withdraw from the SBC because their leaders felt that the denomination had become too conservative. Although SBC churches have never been under any obligation to adopt SBC resolutions, 'the burden of an increasingly conservative doctrine and agenda' was, for many, 'just too much'.⁵⁷³ 'Those who have left for doctrinal reasons are no longer willing to support these positions, financially or otherwise'.⁵⁷⁴ Trundle suggests that moderates are likely to continue to leave the SBC because of the strictness of the denomination's post-Resurgence conservatism, but he also concedes that the 'conservative nature of the SBC is what attracts and holds the majority'.⁵⁷⁵

In order to grow again, Trundle argues, SBC churches in Shelby and other counties like it must begin to appeal to the growing ethnic minority presence. To begin with, SBC churches should 'stop moving away when the surrounding neighbourhoods grow too diverse,' and should instead 'work to make the church membership resemble the neighbourhood population'; additionally, the denomination should make a concerted effort 'to promote minorities within the power structure' and 'support racially progressive legislation'.⁵⁷⁶ Currently, ethnic minorities are deterred from joining SBC churches for the same reason that many white moderates have left the denomination—i.e. it's excessively conservative doctrine. 'The overall conservatism of the denomination is often at odds with the stated desire to be progressive on the issue of race, and there has simply not been enough change...to impress the critics'.⁵⁷⁷ Meanwhile, the SBC's history of racism has resulted in a reputational problem that has lingered all the way until the present day. In an attempt to address this issue, in 1995 the SBC publically apologised for its role in resisting civil rights

⁵⁷¹ Trundle, "Doctrine, Demographics, and the Decline of the Southern Baptist Convention".

⁵⁷² Tennessee Quick Facts: Shelby County," US Census Bureau, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/47/47157.html>, referenced in *ibid*, p. 76.

⁵⁷³ *Ibid*, p. 83.

⁵⁷⁴ *Ibid*.

⁵⁷⁵ *Ibid*.

⁵⁷⁶ *Ibid*, p. 96.

⁵⁷⁷ *Ibid*, p. 95.

and for the blatant racism that permeated much of the denomination up until the 1970s. But this did little to resolve the SBC's image problem, particularly amongst the racial group which had been on the receiving end of the denomination's historical prejudices. Quoting Ellen Rosenberg's suggestion that to be southern is to be 'hyper-American...hyper-patriotic...hyper-racist and -sexist,' Trundle argues that these qualities are, in the eyes of many, 'by extension, a description of the Southern Baptist Convention' itself.⁵⁷⁸ He concludes that 'race is the largest issue facing the SBC in Shelby County,' and that if the denomination 'cannot adequately minister to the African American community, it will increasingly lose its presence in the county'.⁵⁷⁹ Unlike smaller SBC churches in Shelby County, Bellevue has been able compensate for its lack of appeal with African Americans through its popularity with whites. This enabled the church to continue to grow throughout the Rogers pastorate, even as the SBC as a whole was beginning to decline.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that the causes and experiences of Bellevue's relocation were symptomatic of the kind of relationship that the church had had with its local surroundings over the previous three decades. Prior to the actual year of the relocation in 1989, Bellevue's laissez-faire approach towards racial minorities—which was itself in part a result of the church's inerrantist theology—had been loosening community ties between Bellevue and Midtown ever since the beginning of the civil rights movement. Bellevue's indifference towards changing this policy over the ensuing decades in turn increased the church's connections with the suburbs, as many of the church's current and prospective members moved to neighbourhoods like Cordova and Germantown. Although Bellevue displayed an initial willingness to stay in the racially diverse area of Midtown during the start of the Ten Year Plan, once this prospect became less feasible it was not difficult to change approach. By the 1980s the majority of Bellevue's members had vacated the inner-city, making a suburban relocation of the church highly appealing to the church's constituents. Even more importantly, staying in Midtown was not, unlike many other less conservative evangelical churches, considered to be an inherent part of Bellevue's ministerial identity. On the contrary, since relocating to the suburbs would provide the church with more space to realise its numerical targets of membership expansion, moving from Midtown was actually considered an ethically virtuous decision. This enabled Bellevue to label the relocation a "victory in Jesus", and to consider the new site in Cordova as its own Promised Land. Although media coverage of the decision was quick to point out the moral shortcomings of urban withdrawal, the relocation was viewed from the inside as a glorious opportunity to advance Bellevue's spiritual worth. In contrast to other evangelical churches like HPBC in Detroit, within the congregational culture of Bellevue there appeared to be little or no sense of crisis over the ethics of "withdrawing", "departing" or "abandoning" a struggling inner-city environment. Instead,

⁵⁷⁸ Rosenberg, *The Southern Baptists*, p. 4 – 5. Quoted in Trundle, "Doctrine, Demographics, and the Decline of the Southern Baptist Convention", p. 93.

⁵⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 95

Bellevue's theological identity and the priorities of the Ten Year Plan enabled the church to sidestep the issue and create a celebratory atmosphere around the relocation.

The causes of Bellevue's lack of racial integration, as discussed in the second half of this chapter, are also a reflection of how the church interacted with its spatial and social surroundings in the post-civil rights era. Unlike megachurches which belonged to the seeker church paradigm, Bellevue's growth model did not focus on how to attract racial minorities and other demographics which were likely to hold less conservative religious, political and cultural worldviews. Conversely, the church deliberately focussed on targeting the most "reachable" group, which in Bellevue's case was conservative whites. This chapter has shown that the main reasons why Bellevue remained relatively segregated (thereby reducing the connections the church had with its demographically diverse surroundings) were precisely the same reasons the church was so popular with white conservatives. Bellevue's fusion of theological and political conservatism had the side-effect of deterring African Americans from joining, but those very same features were hugely popular with the deeply conservative religious culture of white Memphis. The ostentatiousness of Bellevue's conservatism was accentuated by Bellevue's mimicking of the Christian Right at a congregational level during the 1980s and beyond. Meanwhile, Bellevue's strong associations with the Conservative Resurgence was part of the reputational problem of the SBC in counties like Shelby, which Southern Baptist churches had started to feel the effects of once the racial composition of such areas became less white. This chapter's exploration of the complex interrelationships between theology, congregational culture, and urban withdrawal have, it is hoped, added to the limited body of work that currently exists on the significance, meanings and causes of white flight in the context of American evangelicalism.

Conclusion

Bellevue's formidable campus in Cordova—built on a sprawling, three hundred-acre site thirteen miles east of Downtown, and adjacent to the nation's second longest interstate highway—seems to perfectly embody the transformations that the church, as well as the movement it belongs to, have undergone since the 1960s. Walking through the vast parking lot towards the south entrance of the sanctuary, with its glass façade and white neoclassical columns, one is given the impression of being both geographically and figuratively remote from the humble, inner-city roots of the church. The contrast between Bellevue's current home and the environment it left behind in 1989 led one journalist, writing a few years after the relocation was completed, to argue that 'there are really two cities here along the Mississippi'. While suburban affluence characterised the neighbourhoods of East Memphis, 'just a few miles away inner-city Memphis struggles to survive, and the contortions of that struggle are all too obvious'.⁵⁸⁰ In this respect, the multimillion dollar facility in Cordova stands as a testament to how the rapid post-war growth of conservative evangelicalism was linked with the uneven patterns of urban development in racially and socioeconomically divided American cities like Memphis. Previous chapters have detailed the various ways in which evangelical and urban history were interwoven, demonstrating that the socioeconomics of Sunbelt suburbanisation had important effects on one of the largest and most important Southern Baptist churches in the United States. The lavish sanctuary in Cordova, as well as what the same observer referred to as 'the trappings of middle-class America [which are] evident everywhere' on the campus, are clear indicators of these transformations.⁵⁸¹

This dissertation has originated from the need for a study which examines the features of contemporary conservative evangelicalism at a local, "grassroots" level, and which is therefore receptive to the significance of congregational culture. Bellevue was chosen as a case study not because it represents evangelicalism as a whole (no single church could ever come close to reflecting the complexity and diversity of American evangelicalism), but because of its associations with two of the defining phenomena of the movement's post-war history: the suburbanisation of white congregations and the build-up of the "Christian Right". Thus, although it would be unwise to make sweeping inferences about the whole movement based on this single case study, it is suggested here that this thesis's findings are indeed applicable to other instances of successful, Southern Baptist megachurches which relocated in the wake of desegregation and which had similar conservative leanings to those of Bellevue. As outlined in the Introduction, studies which have attempted to understand the religious dimensions of "white flight" have been few and far between, and the final chapter of this dissertation in particular attempted to shed more light on the process in the southern evangelical context. Meanwhile, it is through the discussion of Bellevue's congregational culture that this thesis makes its second important contribution to the current literature: offering an alternative interpretation of conservative evangelicalism's late-1970s engagement with politics, as well as the movement's unprecedentedly strong electoral and political alliance with the Republican Party. Shifting attention away from the historiography's

⁵⁸⁰ Balmer, "Churchgoing: Bellevue Baptist Church near Memphis", p. 484.

⁵⁸¹ Ibid, p. 486.

preoccupation with elite-level mobilisation has revealed that, at a congregational level, the primary mechanism through which conservative evangelicals became increasingly engaged with politics and affiliated with the GOP was not partisan mobilisation; rather, it was the creation of a conservative political culture which was in large part a symptom of demographic and urban change, and Bellevue's strengthening connections with the suburbs.

From the beginning of the 1980s there existed at Bellevue a new dimension of the church's congregational culture which mirrored the Christian Right's blend of religious and political conservatism, as well as other features of Republican Party conservatism. If, as this thesis contends, this political culture was in large part a product of the church's connections with suburbanisation, then in order to trace the origins of such a phenomenon it has been necessary to go back further than the moment when Ronald Reagan appeared at the National Affairs Briefing in Dallas in August 1980, or when Jerry Falwell launched the Moral Majority in 1979. Instead, it has been necessary to examine our case from the beginning of the 1960s, when the civil rights movement was gaining momentum in the South and desegregation campaigns were spreading to churches. Bellevue's response to the kneel-in protestors and the prospect of racial integration was to position itself at the ideological centre of existing discourses on race. In other words, the church tolerated the presence of African Americans in its pews but it never went as far as actively intervening in (or even publically condemning) America's "race problem". As this thesis showed, one of the main reasons for Bellevue's indifference towards racial inequality and integration was its conservative theology which, like countless other conservative SBC congregations, strongly prioritised individual soul conversion over social gospel. Meanwhile, like countless other white churches in the country, Bellevue's approach towards integration was informed by the prevailing assumption that racial segregation in America's pews was an inevitability. These factors would have a profound effect on the church's future prospects for racial integration, particularly over the course of the next ten years, when white flight in Memphis intensified and Bellevue's Midtown neighbourhood would become home to an increasing number of African Americans.

The 1970s were transformative years for both Memphis and its largest, most famous church. Prior to the arrival of Adrian Rogers in 1972, Bellevue had spent the previous twelve years in decline, thanks mainly to the unpopularity of his predecessor Ramsey Pollard. But Rogers' preaching dynamism and entrepreneurial ethos reinvigorated the church at every level, with the Floridian pastor ushering in a new era of prolonged growth. Bellevue's staunch theological conservatism, flaunted by Rogers with a fervour which Pollard lacked, was the central reason why the church grew at a rate which exceeded that of other evangelical churches in the city and the region. Meanwhile, attempts to implement racial integration in the public school system led to increased political polarisation and residential segregation in Memphis. Assisted by the political economy of the Sunbelt and discriminatory state-sponsored housing allocation practices, the city's eastern suburbs burgeoned, as white, predominantly middle class residents flocked to such neighbourhoods from inner-city areas and elsewhere. Many of Bellevue's own members participated in white flight, which had been increasing in Memphis ever since the Supreme Court's busing ruling in 1972. (There is no record of exactly how many Bellevue congregants left for the suburbs during the 1970s and 1980s, but one of the justifications for the church's subsequent relocation was so that it could

be closer to seventy percent of its laypeople, suggesting that the majority of its members were by that point living in the suburbs).

By 1980, Bellevue members and thousands of other whites made up around ninety percent of the population of areas like Germantown in the east of the city. Meanwhile, one of the central features of Rogers' growth model for Bellevue during the 1970s and beyond was to revive the church's audience by attracting the very same young, upwardly mobile, middle class whites who were moving to the suburbs in such high numbers. Even though Bellevue's current location in Midtown was several miles away from East Memphis, attracting people who fitted this profile was not difficult because Bellevue's reputation, combined with popularity and allure of Rogers himself, easily compensated for the inconvenience of the church's location. Bellevue's extraordinary growth during the 1970s therefore strengthened the church's ties with the suburbs, resulting in a congregational composition which was more "suburbanised"—in cultural and socioeconomic, and even political terms—than it had been prior to the creation of "island suburbs".⁵⁸² Thus, by the beginning of the 1980s, despite its physical existence in the heart of Midtown, 'Bellevue was no longer a true "neighbourhood church,"' in the sense that its racial and socioeconomic characteristics did not mirror those of its surroundings.⁵⁸³

Rogers was so popular with Memphis's white evangelicals that within eight years of his arrival the congregation had grown by fifty percent. In 1972, his first year at Bellevue, the church had around eight thousand members, but in 1980 that figure had risen to over twelve thousand. By this point it was clear that the church had outgrown its current, twenty-year-old sanctuary, itself a product of the success of Rogers' illustrious predecessor, Dr Robert Lee. While the church's leaders began looking for ways in which to accommodate Bellevue's flourishing congregation, Rogers and layman Ed McAteer became heavily involved with the SBC's Conservative Resurgence and the Christian Right. Between 1979 and 1982, the two Bellevue colleagues used their positions of influence to further the accommodationist cause via their school prayer initiative, helping to forge an alliance between the SBC, the Christian Right and the Republican Party. The effects that this activity had on the congregational culture of Bellevue were subtler and more nuanced than what many would assume for a church with such close connections with the SBC and the Christian Right. Like his fellow politically active Baptist preachers, Rogers was keen to keep his political and denominational activities separate from his ministerial duties. Unlike the atmosphere of Republican partisanship during the 1982 SBC convention meeting, for example, Rogers avoided making overt partisan political endorsements from the pulpit, in part because his priority as a pastor had always been preaching the Gospel. According to Rogers himself as well as those who knew him, he had become a denominational politician out of necessity, because of what he saw as the increasing liberalism of the SBC. But his main calling had always been to be a pastor and to evangelise as many people as possible. Moreover, preachers like Rogers and Falwell were wary of diluting the evangelical message by bringing ostensibly political matters into their churches.

Nonetheless, at around the same time that conservative evangelicals were launching lobby groups like the Moral Majority, there emerged a new form of political culture at Bellevue which had not existed ten, or even five years prior to the Conservative Resurgence.

⁵⁸² To borrow Lassiter's phrase. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority*.

⁵⁸³ *By His Grace, For His Glory*, p. 240.

This included a greater engagement with the key Christian Right issues such as abortion and the Equal Rights Amendment, and manifested itself in the church hosting events about “the moral degradation in our nation” and about “woman’s concerns”. (The latter’s euphemistic title was a thin disguise for what was evidently an attempt to rally, through a large meeting of conservative evangelicals from around the country, resistance to the ERA. A few months after the Women’s Concerns Conference at Bellevue, the GOP officially dropped its endorsement of the ERA, a move which was largely made in response to pressure from conservative evangelicals. Meanwhile, the unwillingness to actually mention the ERA at the Conference is further evidence that Bellevue’s leaders wanted, wherever possible, to avoid making ostensibly political or partisan statements). Meanwhile, Bellevue’s new political culture was also about a strong patriotism and support for the military—features which resembled Republican Party conservatism of the period. One of the ways in which this dimension was embodied was in Bellevue’s “Celebrate America” events, which had been an annual fixture at the church since 1976. According to Randall Balmer in his 1992 profile of the church for *Christian Century*, during such events Bellevue’s worship centre ‘looked for all the world like the Republican National Convention’.⁵⁸⁴ Today, symbols of Bellevue’s GOP-inclinations can still be found at various places on the church site, such as the on-campus library, which houses numerous books about neoconservative, pro-evangelical figures such as George W. Bush. The features of Bellevue’s new political culture, as described in this dissertation, help explain how evangelicals’ widespread and unprecedented support for the GOP from the 1980 election onwards was created outside the arenas of elite-level mobilisation and partisan political endorsements from the pulpit.

By the mid-1980s it was becoming increasingly untenable for Bellevue to continue to run its ministries in its current venue. Such was the demand to worship at Bellevue, Rogers was forced to give two separate Sunday sermons in the three thousand-seater sanctuary in Midtown. The Ten Year Plan was launched in September 1982 with the aim of raising \$30 million for a building programme. Initially, Rogers and Bellevue’s deacons were committed to expanding the current Midtown campus, but once that possibility was exhausted the prospect of relocating to a more spacious site in the suburbs, which was closer to the majority of Bellevue’s congregants, was enthusiastically embraced. Unlike other, more liberal evangelical congregations—and despite the negative response of some media outlets and many locals who were not directly affiliated with the church—there was little resistance to the relocation from within the church’s pews. This was due to the lack of connections that Bellevue had to its surrounding neighbourhood, and because serving the Midtown locality was not considered to be an inherent part of the church’s ministerial identity. Thanks to Bellevue’s conservative theology and its relative indifference towards “reaching out” towards the increasing numbers of racial minorities in the neighbourhood, Bellevue had, over the previous two decades, allowed a broadening gulf to exist between the racial composition of the church and that of the neighbourhood itself. Addressing this imbalance could have created firmer connections with the inner-city which might have reduced the likelihood of suburbanisation, but such a policy would have been incompatible with Bellevue’s growth model. Moreover, Bellevue’s conservatism—more ostentatious since the creation of the church’s political culture and its connections with the SBC’s Conservative Resurgence—had

⁵⁸⁴ Balmer, “Churchgoing: Bellevue Baptist Church near Memphis”, p. 487.

the side-effect of deterring African Americans, who were far more likely to ascribe to politically and theologically liberal beliefs, from joining the church in the first place. Lastly, the proposed site in Cordova was seen as the place in which Bellevue's targets for numerical expansion could best be achieved. The congregation's response to the plans was almost unanimously positive, with only a small handful of people dissenting out of a total of four thousand voters. The atmosphere of enthusiasm for the relocation enabled Bellevue to go as far as referring to the move as a "victory in Jesus" and to consider the new site as the church's very own Promised Land.

Shortly after the relocation Bellevue sold the old Midtown site to Mississippi Boulevard Christian Church, one of the largest and most prominent African American congregations in the city, for \$3.5 million, which was considerably below the original asking price of \$15 million.⁵⁸⁵ But once the congregation had been successfully transferred to its Cordova location, those involved with the church never looked back. From the beginning, growth accelerated at an even higher rate than before. Within the first five years of the move, 9,500 new members had joined the congregation, a growth rate which was around twice as high as when the church was in Midtown. In numerical terms, then, the decision to relocate has been vindicated by the growth levels achieved. The main priority of the Ten Year Plan was to evangelise as many people as possible, and it is clear that for a white congregation with a growth model centred on attracting more whites, moving to the suburbs gave the congregation the best possibility to do so. By the time of Rogers' retirement in September 2005 (he would die a few months later at the age of seventy-four), Bellevue had established itself as one of the largest and most successful megachurches in the denomination, with over thirty thousand members and a yearly intake of charitable donations which could be measured in the tens of millions of dollars. By overseeing Bellevue's transformation from a large inner city "neighbourhood" church into a suburban, regional congregation, Rogers also achieved something for his church which had become increasingly common in evangelicalism ever since the 1970s: the creation of a fully-fledged "megachurch" which, as was the norm for other examples such as Willow Creek in Illinois, 'experienced [its] success in the suburbs'.⁵⁸⁶

⁵⁸⁵ The author of this dissertation is indebted to Alvin Jackson, the former pastor of MBCC who now ministers at a church in New York City, for taking the time to talk to him about the history of his church, Bellevue and racial politics in Memphis. His comments enhanced the author's understanding of the late twentieth century history of Memphis. Alvin Jackson, interview with the author, November 21, 2014.

⁵⁸⁶ Williams, "Jerry Falwell's Sunbelt Politics", p. 136. Eleven years after Rogers left the church, Bellevue remains one of the largest churches in the denomination. But the fortunes of Rogers' successor, Dr Steve Gaines, have resembled those of Ramsey Pollard, who was the last pastor to take over from an exceptionally successful Bellevue preacher. In 2006 Gaines was the subject of complaint from a minority of dissenting voices within the church who were unhappy about Gaines' rumoured half-a-million-dollar salary, his apparent dismissal of a popular music director, and allegations that he was intimidating members of the congregation. The issues were magnified by the presence of an online blog ran by a dissenting Bellevue layman. It would appear that Gaines has experienced similar difficulties to Pollard, with both having the unenviable task of replacing one of the twentieth century's most successful American evangelical preachers. See Gregory Tomlin, "Bellevue conflict bleeds onto the internet, into public square," *Baptist Press*, October 18, 2006, accessed June 7, 2016, <http://www.bpnews.net/24193/bellevue-conflict-bleeds-onto-internet-into-public-square>.

Bellevue Baptist Church as a Product of the Sunbelt Suburbs

As previous chapters have shown, the creation of Memphis's "island suburbs" were intrinsically linked to the development of the Sunbelt as a socioeconomic, cultural and political entity. Since so much of Bellevue's post-Pollard success was built upon profiting from its connections with the suburbs, it is therefore makes sense to consider Bellevue and other churches like it to be products of the Sunbelt suburbs. Far from being an anomaly, Bellevue's development as a megachurch has taken place in tandem with trends at denominational and trans-denominational levels. In 1972, Rogers' first year at Bellevue, 145 SBC churches with over 2,000 regular attendees existed (with Bellevue being one of them). Thirty years later, the number of SBC megachurches had risen to 458.⁵⁸⁷ Meanwhile, Bellevue's choice of location in Cordova is consistent with nationwide patterns of megachurch spatial distribution. Like the majority of other megachurches, Bellevue resides in a suburban area in the Sunbelt with a high concentration of relatively wealthy, young and highly-educated residents.⁵⁸⁸ Numerous sociological explanations have been posited for the dramatic post-1970 rise of the megachurch, as well as the reasons for their tendency to be located in the suburbs.⁵⁸⁹ But this thesis has been concerned primarily with the effects that this suburban Sunbelt culture had on the congregational culture of churches like Bellevue.

One of the handful of studies which have 'explored the connection between the Sunbelt's political culture and contemporary evangelicalism' is Daniel K. Williams' illuminating article on the ministerial and political career of Jerry Falwell.⁵⁹⁰ According to Williams, one of the main reasons why Falwell and other southern leaders of the Christian Right (not to mention regular churchgoers) had eventually embraced the Republican Party's 'entire platform' was because the development of the Sunbelt had encouraged them to become 'fully-fledged converts the GOP not only on "moral" issues but also on matters of economics and national defence'.⁵⁹¹ Falwell came of age at a time when the Cold War defence industry was transforming the economic fortunes of his home town of Lynchburg, Virginia. The year after a large nuclear energy company and an electrical supplies business built manufacturing plants in the city, Falwell founded Thomas Road Baptist Church, which like Bellevue would eventually become one of the largest congregations in the country. The formative years of Falwell and his congregation were heavily influenced by the political economy of the Sunbelt, which brought levels of wealth and high-skilled employment that the city had never encountered before. Falwell had always been hostile towards the federal government and the

⁵⁸⁷ Mark Chaves, "All Creatures Great and Small: Megachurches in Context," *Review of Religious Research*, Vol. 47, No. 4 (2006), pp. 329-346, accessed April 10, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20058102>, p. 333.

⁵⁸⁸ Karnes et al, "Mighty Fortresses". Karnes et al's study found that megachurches were also more likely to be in the suburban rings of Sunbelt cities, with Atlanta, Los Angeles and Orlando having the three highest concentrations of the largest category of church.

⁵⁸⁹ See *ibid*; Chaves, "All Creatures Great and Small"; Thumma and Scott, *Beyond Megachurch Myths*.

⁵⁹⁰ Williams, "Jerry Falwell's Sunbelt Politics," p. 127. Other studies which examine the links between Sunbelt political culture and evangelicalism include Miller, *Billy Graham and the Rise of the Republican South*; see also Moreton's study of how evangelical culture facilitated the success of Sam Walton's Wal-Mart enterprise from its origins in small-town Arkansas. Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart*.

⁵⁹¹ Williams, "Jerry Falwell's Sunbelt Politics".

New Deal state (this was initially because of his longstanding defence of racial segregation), but the experience of the Sunbelt brought the pastor firmly line with Lynchburg's fiscally conservative, firmly Republican business elites. This unification of fiscal and social conservatism via Sunbelt economics was repeated elsewhere in the region, so that by the time Falwell formed his Moral Majority lobby-group in 1979 many southern pastors had a 'devotion to the politics of corporate interest that equalled that of any conservative Republican'.⁵⁹² The alliance between the GOP and conservative evangelicals was therefore forged not just through the former's embracement of "moral" issues but also thanks to a 'shared political ideology that reflected the experiences of a particular region'.⁵⁹³

The theme of free market, pro-business ideology has been less relevant to this thesis's analysis than Williams' case study of Falwell (although learning more about Rogers' and Bellevue laypeople's economic orientations would be useful, and potentially the subject of future research). This is in part due to the distinct social and economic context of Memphis. The River City is a much larger than Lynchburg, and despite attracting important private-sector investment in the 1970s it never experienced the same level industrial development as other Sunbelt cities. Thus, Although Memphis's post-civil rights economic development was important, it was not as influential as the cold war defence industries were in Sunbelt towns like Lynchburg. The predominant narrative of Memphis's post-civil rights history was, instead, another theme related to the creation of the Sunbelt: increasing racial division and polarisation, manifested in extreme levels of residential segregation and white suburbanisation. In terms of segregation Memphis was in the same category as the most extreme examples, even for a city with such a high ethnic minority presence (according to the 2010 census African Americans made up almost two thirds of Memphis's population, compared with around one third for Lynchburg). A 1990 study found, for instance, that Memphis's private schools—almost all of which were located in the suburbs—were twice as segregated as the *second most segregated private school system in the country*.⁵⁹⁴ Meanwhile, the side-effects of white flight in Memphis—i.e. a two-tier socioeconomic and racial system in the city—were accentuated by the white elites in City Hall (the first African American mayor of the city was not elected until 1991) and by discriminatory, state-sponsored housing allocation practices. The former were responsible for annexing suburban Shelby County neighbourhoods and thereby bolstering the white electoral base of the city's municipal political system, while the latter ensured that stringent limits were imposed on the extent to which African Americans had access to superior housing and schooling. Arguably more than any other city in the Sunbelt, Memphis had become, in the post-busing era, a city split vividly along racial and socioeconomic lines. In the words of Memphis historian Wanda Rushing, by the end of the 1970s the city was constituted of two 'economic and social landscapes, suburban sprawl and affluence outside the I-240 [interstate] expressway ring and urban poverty within'.⁵⁹⁵

Matthew Lassiter's metaphor of "island suburbs" in the Sunbelt is therefore particularly apt for Memphis, both with regard to the race and class-stratified geographical

⁵⁹² Ibid, p. 142.

⁵⁹³ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁴ Kiel, "Exploded Dream", p. 297.

⁵⁹⁵ Rushing, *Memphis and the Paradox of Place*, p. 4.

divisions between inner-city and suburbs, and in relation to the distinctiveness of the two environments' political and cultural dynamics.⁵⁹⁶ In Memphis and other Sunbelt cities, one of the most significant symptoms of this dualistic racial and socioeconomic system was the creation of a new form of political and racial conservatism in suburbs like Cordova. As discussed in Chapter 2, this "colour-blind" discourse of the Silent Majority became a crucial Republican Party resource and stimulated the 'emergence of a centre-right dynamic that has dominated American politics since the 1960s'.⁵⁹⁷ Even though Bellevue spent the majority of the 1980s in its historic Midtown location, Memphis's white suburbs had an effect on the congregation long before its actual relocation. Despite the changing demographic situation in Midtown, Bellevue never struggled to attract new members during the post-Pollard revival. This was part due to the exceptional popularity of Rogers, but it was also because Bellevue represented an ideal congregational environment for many white conservatives during the post-civil rights era. The church's theological conservatism, which espoused individualist explanations for social and racial inequality, mirrored several of the defining features of colour-blind conservatism, which 'depicted residential segregation as the class-based outcome of meritocratic individualism rather than the unconstitutional product of structural racism'.⁵⁹⁸ Meanwhile, Rogers' targeting of the same middle class, conservative, "first generation suburbanites" who were migrating to East Memphis strengthened the connections the church had with the suburbs, thereby exposing the congregation to the political culture of the Silent Majority.⁵⁹⁹ This was reflected to some extent in the creation of Bellevue's own political culture in the 1980s, which as Chapter 4 discussed was expressed in numerous different forms and which resulted in a closer cultural and political affinity with the Christian Right and the GOP. Sometimes this was even expressed in surprisingly clear, unambiguous ways. As one Bellevue member commented in an interview in 1993, 'voters coming out of Bellevue Baptist were conservative and Republican—that is, "if they're really in tune with what's being taught here"'.⁶⁰⁰ Indeed, by the time the finishing touches were being put on Bellevue's grand new sanctuary, the congregation was in political-cultural—as well as socioeconomic—terms closely aligned with its suburban surroundings.

Contribution

Through the case study of Bellevue Baptist Church this thesis has attempted to demonstrate the connections between a handful of important, interrelated dimensions of post-war Protestant, urban and political history: namely, the resurgent growth of conservative evangelicalism, the rise of the megachurch, the development of the Sunbelt suburbs, and the creation of the "Christian Right". The congregational angle has been a response to the historiographical tendency to examine only the elite-level features of contemporary evangelicalism, and has enabled this thesis to explore how local, urban forces related to

⁵⁹⁶ Lassiter, *The Silent Majority*.

⁵⁹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 3.

⁵⁹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 1.

⁵⁹⁹ A phrase borrowed from Balmer, "Churchgoing: Bellevue Baptist Church near Memphis", p. 487.

⁶⁰⁰ *Ibid*.

important individual churches like Bellevue. This new perspective has resulted in a fresh interpretation of conservative evangelicalism's post-1960s engagement with politics, and the movement's unprecedentedly-strong electoral and political loyalty to the Republican Party. Political scientist Clyde Wilcox defines the Christian Right as 'a social movement that attempts to mobilise evangelical Protestants and other orthodox Christians into political action'.⁶⁰¹ Figures like Jerry Falwell and Bellevue layman Ed McAteer confirm that direct political mobilisation and partisanship was indeed an important part of the story of the Christian Right. But this thesis has shown that beneath the surface of the movement's elite-level partisan mobilisation there existed an underlying political culture at churches like Bellevue which has hitherto never been investigated. The political-cultural framework helps explain both the new willingness, at the beginning of the 1980s, of conservative evangelicals to apply evangelical principles to what had been defined as the pertinent "moral" issues of the period, and the strong, long-lasting loyalty that the movement has shown towards the GOP. In this sense, it is perhaps necessary to amend Wilcox's conventional definition of the Christian Right so that it implies not just a top-down process of mobilisation (or a "social movement") but also takes into account the millions of ordinary laypeople who attended conservative churches like Bellevue and who at a collective level made the macro-level political realignments of the movement a reality. A point made by Matthew Lassiter in his study of the Silent Majority is highly pertinent in this respect: it was 'suburban homeowners who were neither committed activists nor conservative ideologues' who were the real driving force behind many of the political realignments of the post-civil rights age.⁶⁰²

The alliance between conservative evangelicals and the GOP is often taken for granted today, but it is important to remember that before the 1980s it did not even exist. Prior to their abandonment of Jimmy Carter and the Democratic Party, conservative evangelicals were roughly as likely to vote Democrat as they were to support the GOP. Just under half of white evangelicals backed the Baptist presidential nominee in 1976 (with fifty-six percent of white Baptists supporting Carter).⁶⁰³ However, ever since the 1980 presidential election conservative evangelicals have displayed an unusually steadfast electoral loyalty towards the Republican Party. Sixty-seven percent of white evangelicals voted for Reagan in 1980, and in every presidential election that has taken place since then conservative evangelicals have turned out for Republican candidates at a strongly disproportional rate. This is despite the fluctuating fortunes over the last thirty-five years of the Christian Right's most famous representatives. In the 1990s, for instance, Jerry Falwell experienced a severe drop in his political influence, and the Virginian pastor discontinued the Moral Majority in 1989 (although it was relaunched in 2004 under a different name). Nonetheless, during the twenty-first century white evangelicals have supported the GOP with what is arguably an even greater enthusiasm than during the height of their relationship with Reagan. In the 2000 and 2004 elections, for instance, between eighty and eight-five percent of evangelicals voted for George W. Bush. Thus, regardless of the condition of the Christian Right's elite, there has been a consistent evangelical affinity with the GOP at a collective level. The creation of a conservative political

⁶⁰¹ Clyde Wilcox, *Onward Christian Soldiers? The Religious Right in American Politics*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), p 5.

⁶⁰² Lassiter, *The Silent Majority*, p. 8.

⁶⁰³ Williams, *God's Own Party*, p. 193.

culture in evangelical churches, which mirrored key features of the GOP and helped tether the movement to the Party, helps explain how this loyalty was possible, even while the political influence of figures like Falwell was declining.

One of the many paradoxes of American evangelicalism is the movement's fraught relationship with politics. It does not take long for any scholar studying the history of evangelical politics to stumble across manifestations of this paradox. The research carried out for this dissertation has demonstrated to the author that the post-civil rights decades of the movement were no exception to this trend. Evangelicals' confusing and sometimes contradictory approaches towards politics has made understanding the nature of their engagement a challenge. But this thesis has nonetheless attempted to take these contradictions seriously and to confront them directly.⁶⁰⁴ The most important conundrum discussed in this dissertation has been the clear Republicanisation of conservative white evangelicals—what Daniel K. Williams refers to as 'a Republican voting bloc that party strategists could not afford to ignore'—and the simultaneous hesitance of evangelical leaders and laypeople at churches like Bellevue to bring partisan politics into the pulpit.⁶⁰⁵ Although some members of Bellevue were indeed receptive to the linkages between the church's religious culture and the GOP, many have felt that their faith had nothing to do with politics. To these people, the denominational and political activities of Rogers and McAteer felt like an irrelevance to their spiritual lives, and they often did not consider themselves to be political at all. It is submitted here that the political-cultural framework exhibited in this dissertation allows for these contradictory factors to exist simultaneously. This is because the creation of Bellevue's new congregational culture during the 1980s and beyond—which informed the political behaviours and attitudes of the church's members—was more about the influence of indirect factors than it was to do with the somewhat restrictive, limited notions of partisan pronouncements and direct political mobilisation. The political-cultural framework has taken into account how the experiences of demographic and cultural change in the post-civil rights Sunbelt suburbs informed the congregational culture of conservative evangelicalism, and in turn the political orientations and behaviours of this particularly enigmatic group.

⁶⁰⁴ Other studies which are directly interested in these contradictions include Richard Kyle's work on evangelicals' paradoxical relationship with American culture and politics, which argues that in an attempt to maintain its relevance the movement has embraced and in some cases even sanctified aspects of American popular and secular culture. Kyle, *Evangelicalism*.

⁶⁰⁵ Williams, *God's Own Party*, p. 193.

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