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LINDA – Fieldnotes – April 9, 2007

Subject: Karen Brymer  
Location: My office, ZB 303D  
Time:

[These notes were written up on May 2, three weeks after the interview, and are very incomplete.]

Karen and I set up an appointment to meet in my office. When she appears I am struck by the contrast between her youthful face and graying hair.

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Some uncertainty as we figured out how to proceed. She asks, Do you want to know about church structure, or [can't remember the rest]? I say all of it.

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She begins by explaining, "Instead of congregation, we say **ward**." She estimates that 300 people will show up to a given service, but the total number is probably closet to 600. She explains that a smaller ward, 0-300 people, would be called a **branch**.

A **bishop** heads the ward. There are 125 million members worldwide. Half of the members are outside the U.S. The church is "very structured," Karen explained, with the same manuals used in Indonesia as Harlem. The same processes and structures are found in each ward, "very top-down." [Not sure if the title of "bishop" is used for the Harlem ward, the "**stake**" (explained later as all the wards in Manhattan), and the entire church.]

Underneath the bishop are two **counselors**, with **presidents** for each group, e.g. "**auxiliary group**," "**Men's only**" over age 18, "**Women's Relief Society**" for women over 18 yo, a **young men's** group for 12-18 year olds, a **young women's** group also for 12-18 yos, and a primary group for children ages 18 months to 12 years. [I assume the children are not separated by gender.]

She mentions that Spanish congregations may also meet in the same building, although they are a different ward.

She refers me to [www.lds.org/organization](http://www.lds.org/organization), where I can see some Scripture and download manuals, which include instruction manuals.

In Harlem, she tells me, it was "just a branch of 8 members 8 years ago." She explains that the wards grow through converts, and "also people like me who've moved here." She refers me to a New York Times article (that she later emails to me) that features the Harlem ward. She explains that they just got a new building. There's "all different kinds of attending," including "local African Americans," people from Barbados, Jamaica, the Dominican Republic, and Korea, "from all over the world." She said this ward includes young married couples in their twenties and thirties, "from the west."

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She differentiates between “**people who have grown up in the church**” and “**people who have been converted.**” Matter-of-factly, she tells me that people who have grown up in the church are mostly white.

I ask if Spanish-speaking people may attend any service they want, and she explains that people are supposed to go to the closest ward. Wards have “geographic boundaries,” so “if I lived above 145<sup>th</sup> Street I would go to a different ward.” There are only a few Spanish-speaking wards, so people may have to travel farther to get to one. When I ask if some people who attend services live outside of the ward boundaries, she says that some do. [I can’t remember if she used the word “services” or not. At some point I comment that I am learning a great deal of new vocabulary; Karen says “vernacular.”]

She explains that there are 12 wards in Manhattan, with 3 up in Inwood. One is focused for singles, 18-31, and another is a family ward. I ask about the singles ward, and she explains that the church is very family-oriented, and encourages “members to marry members.” She tells me, “Family is key,” and it’s “not looked on favorably for people to live together.”

There are 3 meetings every Sunday, she tells me.

1. **Sacrament meeting:** everyone meets together, not paid leadership. That is, people in the congregation are asked to speak. E.g. for Easter, the primary children sang a song, people were asked to speak.
2. **Sunday School:** divides up into the different ages, the groups listed above.
3. **Primary continues;** youth groups, the young men’s/women’s groups. Something about men going into the priesthood.

Within the youth organization, there are three classes:

1. 12-18 yo
2. 14-15 yo
3. 17-18 yo

The president works with one of the leaders.

We talk briefly about **leadership opportunities**, including **assignments**, when the bishop “calls” people to speak, to be the president, and so on. E.g. Karen is a counselor in Relief Society, in charge of teachers who teach in Relief Society. This includes activities for personal development, education. This means she holds a teacher development class during the Sunday School hour.

[My notes are unclear; I wrote “other ward—less standardized. I seem to recall that she was speaking of the Inwood ward as less standardized, partially since it is a Spanish ward. Next in my notes lists “tutoring/mentoring programs.” I am not sure if this lack of standardization is a bad thing, given her previous emphasis on the “same manuals” being used across the world.]

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All the wards in Manhattan, she explains, make up a **stake**. There is a **president** of the stake, and **stake activities**. There's an education specialist at the **stake level**. Again, there is a presidency for each organization, including the auxiliary organization.

She's been a member of this ward since September 2005. She's seen a lot of growth, the new building go up, and **capacity building for leadership** with plenty of "opportunities to lead."

Bishop Pavon, she explains, has only been a member for 5 years. He converted, versus the previous Bishop. Bishop Pavon was a member of the Elders Quorum, then asked to be Bishop.

The ward is "making inroads in the Black community." She explains that "traditionally" the church has been white. "The fact that we have a church in Harlem," when it was dedicated, "I think it was Rankel" who said, "if you had told me [a few years ago that] there'd be a church of this size in Harlem I would have laughed."

Something about a "bridge building group" and "outreach to the community" to build a "better image, relationship in the community." She mentions the genealogy fairs as a form of outreach—DNA testing that brings in people curious about their genealogy. The church has the largest genealogy database, with "centers open to the community." I responded strongly to the bridge building group as people with whom we'd like to speak.

She mentions Claudia Bushman [can't remember why] with a disclaimer that "I don't always agree with her opinions."

Next in my notes: that it's "perceived to be a white church." She explains, "You look at the leadership."

Something about the church written up in a tour book. Visitors aren't allowed in the **temples**, where only members are allowed. In the temples people [perform?] **sacred covenants, personal covenants**. Members are "living to a particular standard," "living the morality code, health code, tithing."

She also mentions a group who were working on a documentary on the growth of the church in Harlem. She's not sure if they finished the documentary.

She mentions cultural differences. In the Harlem church, for example, the speaker will say Good morning brothers and sisters, and the audience responds, Good morning. This is "unique to Harlem." [Karen's anthropological eye]

[My notes at this point are illegible and incomplete. Some fragments: "people really enjoy" "after sacrament is over" "anyone who is visiting" "the congregation responds with a unanimous [illegible]."]

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She mentions that an African American woman was one of the original 8 [in the Harlem ward.]

This ward has a lot of single parent families.  
Fourteen women were baptized last year, a “very high number.”

#### Some forms of education

1. Receiving information from missionaries about the gospel, different doctrines
2. Receiving a calling: training on how to fulfill the assignment, to say the prayer, skills, opportunities
3. committees
4. Spanish ward has an education specialist, trying to guide youth to finish formal education, go onto a trade

Wednesdays there are youth activities, young men’s and young women’s group meetings. Informal ways of learning, youth in stake taken out for a week [camping? can’t remember where].

#### Comments:

Lots of Karen looking at what I wrote, qualifying and correcting  
I felt bombarded with information, wished I had looked at the website before talking with Karen.

At the same time, it also felt like a script that I could get from any relatively involved member of the ward. [Look, my education has begun!] Also, that Karen does this over and over again.