

Today, there are over 200 truckstop chapels at travel plazas across the United States. These chapels, generally erected within modified semi trailers, are installed by one of several specialized trucking ministries and staffed by volunteer or paid chaplains from one to seven days a week. Virtually all chapels hold regular worship services on Sundays, and most are staffed on weekdays as well; a time when personal prayer, counseling, Bible study, and evening services may take place. When unstaffed, chapels are often left open for any drivers who wish to enter. In many cases, the chaplains on duty, often former or part-time truck drivers, spend several nights per week in the chapel's living quarters, prepared for visits to the chapel at any hour.

I first encountered a truckstop chapel in November 2008, when I stopped at a travel plaza in Milton, Pennsylvania while driving from Ohio to my home state of New Jersey. In the corner of the parking lot was a silver trailer, fitted with windows and a wooden staircase leading to a glass door. Above the door, a lighted red-and-white awning read: WELCOME DRIVERS

JESUS LOVES YOU

A cross formed by interconnected red brake lights extended from the left side of the chapel upward into the night sky. Although it was late, the lights in the chapel were on. I decided to go inside.

As I entered the chapel, a bell attached to the door chimed loudly, presumably to alert the resident of the front section of the chapel. I waited for the door marked "Living Quarters" to open, but no one emerged. Alone in this unusual chapel, I began to look around. The walls, covered in pink carpet, were decorated with a number of Christian prints and signs. Near the entrance stood a microphone with stand and a two-tiered

electric organ. Upon the organ were several framed photographs of people standing in front of the chapel. Shelves held tracts, pamphlets, and cassette tape sermons, free for the taking. Along the walls, two lines of five wood and brown vinyl pews extended forward from the back of the chapel, leaving space for an aisle in between. On each seat sat a Bible. After spending a few minutes in the chapel, I continued on my way.

While I initially thought of the chapel merely as a novel and uncommon place of worship, I soon began to think about it more deeply. The chapel, left with its door unlocked and lights on even late at night, enabling and encouraging anyone who might be at the truckstop to enter, was a remarkable and touching demonstration of trust and faith. This was undoubtedly the deed of a dedicated and devoted individual or organization. The presence of the living quarters in the chapel, even if uninhabited at the time, further indicated such commitment. Additionally, given what little knowledge I had of the trucking profession, it seemed that allowing the facility to be accessible at night was a considerate way of accommodating the frequently erratic schedules of truck drivers, making a spiritual retreat possible at any hour. Impressed by the truckstop chapel I had seen, I began researching trucking ministries, truckstop chapels, and religious life on the road.

In this podcast, we will explore the ways in which various forms of audio enhance and often enable the daily spiritual practice of drivers of faith. For many drivers, a major part of the religious experience takes place on an auditory level. Listening is not a supplementary or occasional practice, but rather an extremely central one. By examining the listening practices of Christian truck drivers, and noting the extent to which trucking

ministries encourage and contribute to such practices, we are able to recognize and understand the exceptional importance of sound, both transmitted and reproduced, to religious life on the road. But before I talk about listening, allow me to better explain the trucking lifestyle and the role that specialized trucking ministries may play in it.

There are an estimated three million professional truck drivers in the United States. These individuals work for long hours, spending lengthy periods of time away from home in a solitary work environment. This austere, transient lifestyle often requires drivers to sleep either in the sleeper cabin of the truck or in motel rooms. Trucking ministries encourage drivers to take up religious practices compatible with these unique conditions, thus providing a specific model for religious life on the road. In this way, trucking ministries do not simply aim to teach drivers how to live a Christian life, but actively work to teach them how to be Christian truck drivers, to re-purpose and adapt their professional lives in such a way that provides opportunity for spiritual growth.

While some drivers may participate in a variety of religious practices within the walls of truckstop chapels or in the public spaces of travel plazas, their spiritual practice is most often conducted in the solitary setting of the truck, where they spend the vast majority of their time. For many drivers of faith, the day-to-day scenario presented by the trucking profession, despite its potential difficulties, is viewed in an opportunistic light. In one sermon at an Association of Christian Truckers jamboree in Brownstown, IL Chaplain Ellis explained, “We have opportunities as truckers...you’ve got time, which you can spend in the word, and you can be taught...and you can become anything you

want to become in that eight-foot box, I'll tell you that!"¹ Certainly, this private work environment, coupled with long hours on the road, creates the potential for many hours of personal religious practice, provided that it can occur safely and easily while driving. Audio recordings such as tapes, compact discs, and MP3s are ideally suited to use in these circumstances.

Many drivers regularly listen to recorded sermons, religious music, and Christian radio programs during their travel time. One interviewed driver maintains a strict standard in this regard, commenting, "I only listen to Gospel and preaching."² Another driver remarked, "Sometimes I'll listen to rock n' roll, oldie but goodie stations, country—those songs, they keep you going, but not like Christian songs."³ In certain cases, listening to religious materials may cause an exceptional experience to take place within the cab. One driver recalled:

One day, I was in my truck, and I heard that song, "Our God is an Awesome God," and I just started crying...I had heard it before, but that day, I cried—why, I don't know.⁴

For many drivers, personal listening practices may become fully associated with the task of driving, forming a unified practice. One driver enthusiastically commented, "Boy, I tell you, there's nothing better than driving through Wyoming, putting on some CD's, some Gospel, some preaching..."⁵

¹ Sermon delivered by Chaplain Ellis, Brownstown, IL, October 23, 2010.

² Interview with Felix, Hebron, OH, January 16, 2011.

³ Interview with Raymond, Lodi, OH, October 3, 2010.

⁴ Interview with Raymond, Lodi, OH, October 3, 2010.

⁵ Interview with Felix, Hebron, OH, January 16, 2011.

Trucking ministries actively contribute to and encourage certain listening practices through recommendation and suggestion. Many of the suggested recordings are produced and distributed by these same ministries. These recordings, of sermons and Christian music, are typically distributed free of charge at truckstop chapel services, and are often specialized so as to include subject matter and language pertaining directly to the trucking industry. Truckstop Ministries, Inc. produces and distributes compact discs and tapes featuring the trucking-related sermons of founder Chaplain Joe Hunter. Truckers Christian Chapel Ministries also produces recorded sermons and gospel music for distribution to drivers, who are then encouraged to pass the materials on to others after they are through listening to them. In one such sermon, entitled, “Hey Driver,” Reverend Bill Stanley, himself a driver for eleven years, addresses the listener in a mood of spiritual and literal companionship, saying, “If you don’t mind, driver, I’d like to just ride down the road with you, and sort of explain one very important verse of the Bible to you...”⁶

In recent years, a number of technology-based trucking ministries have emerged.⁷ These ministries utilize mobile technology in order to provide spiritual resources to drivers, regardless of location or schedule. Chuck Sonn, a fuel buyer within the trucking industry, manages one such ministry, Highway Fellowship, which encourages drivers to

⁶ Reverend Bill Stanley, “Hey Driver.” Truckers’ Christian Chapel Ministries. The verse in question is John 3:16, to which Stanley refers as “a promise from God...the message of salvation.”

⁷ A directory of such ministries can be found at: TNT Revival Ministries, “Different Lines.” Accessed April 14, 2011, http://www.ourchurch.com/member/t/tntrevival/index.php?p=1_18_Different-Lines.

“Start your day the best way”⁸ by participating in conference calls consisting of fellowship, Bible devotional, and prayer. The calls are facilitated 365 days per year at 6:30 AM CST. Sonn commented on the role of his ministry, explaining, “Nothing’s going to replace that face-to-face fellowship of breaking bread. That’s a wonderful experience. But the reality is, that doesn’t have to be our only experience...the trucker’s always on the other end of that phone.”

Highway Fellowship currently operates through a conference call network known as SkypeTalk, managed by driver-minister Dean Hufford, which offers at least three telephone-based programs per day. While the approach of ministries such as Highway Fellowship and SkypeTalk are strongly focused on mobile technology, many trucking ministries are making similar (if less central) endeavors. Transport For Christ, a major trucking ministry operating over 30 truckstop chapels throughout North America, offers a 24-hour prayer line, staffed by live volunteers. Scott Weidner, President and CEO of Transport For Christ, International, commented, “The drivers are getting younger. I mean, there’s plenty of older truckers out there, but there’s a lot of new guys, a lot of younger guys, and the trucks themselves are becoming more high-tech. So, the fellows that we’re dealing with are becoming more tech-savvy, so we want to be able to tap into that and make the connection for them at that level as well.”⁹

Ministerial efforts based around mobile technology are further cementing the central position that audio may hold in the daily practice of drivers of faith. While listening to pre-recorded sermons or religious music on the road certainly enables drivers

⁸ Highway Fellowship, “Highway Fellowship.” Accessed March 12, 2011, <http://www.highwayfellowship.com>.

⁹ Telephone Interview with Scott Weidner, President and C.E.O. of Transport For Christ, International, July 26, 2010.

to transform the cab of the truck into a sacred space, this transformation is limited in the sense that the driver may only inhabit the role of recipient, listener. Conference lines such as Highway Fellowship and SkypeTalk expand this function by allowing live association, or in religious terms, fellowship or communion, to take place through sound. In this way, drivers may worship together in a dynamic, egalitarian way, taking on any number of roles, even delivering sermons from behind the wheel.

Trucking ministries and drivers integrate listening with religious practice, in order to make it more compatible with the particulars of daily life. While the ‘audio church’ model is especially suited to the nature of religious life on the road, we may use this example as an entry point to think more deeply about our own listening practices. In the practice of these drivers of faith, we see a very deliberate endeavor to develop their spiritual selves through a set of listening practices. This raises a number of questions—to what extent do our own listening practices shape the way we learn, think, and live? If we were to follow the example of these drivers, and listen with great determination to material that echoes who we feel we are, or wish to be, what sort of results would we see? And, how are we already doing this?

In the ‘audio church’ example, we are reminded, or perhaps made newly aware of certain unique aspects of sound. The audio church services may be scheduled at any time, according to the availability and preference of those involved. Location, of course, is not an issue. In this nomadic church, highly specific congregations, which might not have the resources or population density to occupy a physical space, can easily be formed. These

congregations also allow for a wide range of agency. Individuals can either participate or remain anonymous, according to their personal preference. The audio format encourages participants to engage in spoken communication. In this way, there is a great deal of emotion and spontaneity in these conversations. This provides individuals who may have been hesitant to speak in a more traditional setting with an opportunity to ask questions, express struggles, or provide inspiration to others. This sort of visual anonymity may be an attractive option for those who, for any number of reasons, feel uncomfortable physically attending meetings or gatherings. Even for those who do feel comfortable, an audio counterpart may serve as a valuable supplement.

The prominent role of recorded and transmitted audio in the religious lives of truck drivers demonstrates that listening is not a series of isolated incidents, but rather an ongoing practice woven into everyday life, and may, deliberately or otherwise, become part and parcel of larger ideals and aspirations. Most importantly, in such practice, we see one way in which people have creatively, practically, and meaningfully “made the most” of listening, allowing it to enrich and continually influence their lives in a deeply personal way. This, in turn, can encourage us to find our own ways to do the same.