Chapter Four

Worldviews and Values: A Descriptive Analysis
of Sixty Congregational Websites

Organizational websites use photos, words of invitation, mission statements, descriptions of activities, links to pages within the website, and links to outside organizations to communicate the uniqueness of their organization and to convey an invitation to engage in some way with their goals. Congregations, a particular type of organization, use websites to serve two audiences, potential visitors and current members/attenders, and they use linguistic and visual resources strategically to address those two audiences. Based on an in-depth study of six congregational websites, and after working with a website designer to refine my ideas, I came up with a list of more than 100 website features, including photographs, kinds of verbal content, specific words, and types of links that appear on many congregational websites. This chapter reports on the results of a study of 60 websites using the research method of content analysis. Each of the websites was examined for the more than 100 features.[16] The 60 websites – 20 each from distinct samples of megachurches, vibrant liberal/mainline churches, and emergent churches – are closely representative of the three kinds of congregations. As a result, generalizations can be made with some confidence from the data. These data are descriptive; they present an overview of the website features and vocabulary that occur on the three kinds of sites and the ways these features contribute to my conceptual framework. Content analysis can provide "indicators of worldviews, values, attitudes, opinions, prejudices and stereotypes, and compare these across communities" (Bauer, 2002, p. 133, 134), and the variables presented in this chapter

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[16] Homepages of the 60 church websites were examined for verbal text, photos, graphics, and links. In addition, pages that had information for newcomers; statements of the congregation's vision, purpose or values; or frequently asked questions were examined for verbal text only. The additional pages are called "other pages" in the tables in this chapter.

function as indicators that reveal much about the identities of the congregations studied.

This chapter is organized around clusters of features and words that are related to each other and that reveal significant differences or similarities between the groups of congregations. Issues related to website structure, online community and congregational community are presented first. The large number of website features on the megachurch sites, coupled with a lower number of internal links, reveal aspects of megachurch strategy. The emergent church commitment to both online and face-to-face community is evident. Next, the ways that congregations welcomed newcomers and encouraged engagement are discussed. All three kinds of congregations employed strategies to extend a welcome and encourage engagement, but the way they went about these endeavors was distinctly different. The visual features on websites and congregations' embrace of the arts are considered next, with an emphasis on the megachurches' use of numerous photos, the vibrant liberal/mainline churches' use of denominational graphics and photos of their buildings, and the emergent churches' engagement with the arts. Lastly, congregational values revealed through words such as "justice" and "authenticity" are presented. All of these patterns in features, visuals, and verbal statements reveal insights about the congregations' self-presentation on their websites.

<center>The New Orality and Online Community</center>

Megachurches have budgets that are much larger than vibrant liberal/mainline or emergent churches, so in most cases they have more money to spend on their websites. Therefore it would be logical to expect that their websites would be more complex in features, visuals, and graphics than the websites of the other churches. Content analysis of 11 website features shows that indeed the megachurch homepages did have more photos, more graphics, and more internal links than the other two types of churches; they were more likely to use slideshows (in which photos or graphics take turns occupying the same space) or video on their homepage; and they were more

likely to have links to audio, video and/or podcasts (see Table 4.1). Megachurches did not have more outlinks on their homepages, though. Both the vibrant liberal/mainline church sites and the emergent church sites had more outlinks (14.9% and 16.3% of total links respectively), with emergent churches having the most. On megachurch websites, outlinks were only 5.1% of total links. The lack of a high number of outlinks that would correspond with their high number of internal links suggests the self-sufficiency of the megachurches. The outlinks on the vibrant liberal/mainline homepages often provided connections to denominational resources and local community organizations, while the outlinks on the emergent homepages were more likely to provide connections to resources that are online only, such as Mapquest or online Bible resources, with some links to local community organizations. These outlinks provide insights into the way these the three kinds of congregations presented their identites: the megachurches as self-sufficient, the vibrant liberal/mainline churches as connected to their denominations and surrounding communities, and the emergent churches as connected electronically to the online world while still connected to their local communities.

Table 4.1. Complexity of Website

Mean on homepage	Megachurches (n=20)	Vibrant liberal/mainline (n=20)	Emergent (n=20)	Significance *(p=)*[17]
Number of photos	7.9	3.3	5.0	.042*
Number of graphics	5.4	2.2	3.0	.012*
Number of internal links	33.5	15.7	20.6	.008*
Number of outlinks	1.8	2.8	4.0	.242
Total number of links	35.3	18.4	24.6	.029*
Outlinks as a percentage of total links	5.1%	14.9%	16.3%	.036*
Percent of websites with element on homepage				
Use of slideshow	55%	0%	20%	.000**
Use of video	20%	0%	5%	.059
Link to audio/video/podcast	80%	5%	40%	.000**
Links in the form of graphics	75%	45%	65%	.144
Links to newsletter	50%	65%	10%	.001*
Links to virtual community[18]	5%	0%	55%	.000**

Turning to another feature shown in Table 4.1, the vibrant liberal/mainline homepages had the most links to a newsletter or weekly bulletin, often in the form of a PDF file, indicating that the bulletin or newsletter was likely produced on paper and scanned for the website. The megachurch homepages also had a relatively high number of links to newsletters and bulletins, which were more likely to be in electronic form and appear to have been produced for the website, rather than having been produced

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[17] Throughout this chapter, one asterisk is used after the calculation of significance to indicate that the result is less than .05, which is believed by statisticians to indicate that these results are not likely to have happened by chance. Two asterisks are used to indicate a much higher standard of statistical probability, with *p* value of less than .001.

[18] A link to virtual community was defined as a link that connects the viewer to a blog, chat, poll, message board, or group (such as a yahoo group).

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for distribution on paper first. The emergent sites were the most likely to offer forms of online connection. For example, Matthew's House homepage was in the form of a blog, with posts by various congregation members about events and activities. One member posted a brief book review on the Matthew's House homepage, and another member commented on the homepage, thanking the reviewer for "sending this book my way."[19] More than half of the emergent church homepages offered links to blogs, chat or message boards, with a few of those also offering online polls on their homepage. These opportunities for online community through the congregation contrast with much of the research on religious online community. Campbell (2001, 2003a, 2003b, 2005) has noted that people of faith who engage in online religious community are likely to be involved both in a local congregation and in online community that is not related to the congregation and that offers some kind of connection that the congregation cannot offer. She cites the example of visually impaired people who are involved in their congregation but also enjoy spiritual connection online with other people who are visually impaired. She argues that religious leaders need not be afraid that online religious community will damage or compromise the ministry of congregations because different needs are met in each setting (see also Bazin & Cottin, 2003). The emergent churches in contrast demonstrated interest in both face-to-face connection and online community.

These patterns – online community on the emergent church websites, links to PDF newsletters on the vibrant liberal/mainline websites, and many internal links but relatively few outlinks on the megachurch websites – reveal significant differences between the three kinds of congregations' self-presentation. The emergent church websites were most likely to provide places where the voices of congregation members can be heard, while the megachurch sites provided numerous options for activity without allowing many voices to be heard. These patterns relate to Ong's (1982) concept of secondary orality. Ong argues that as we move into a technological age, we may also be entering into a period of secondary orality, related to the forms of orality

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[19] In Oceanside, CA. Downloaded October 19, 2006.

that are present in cultures that are untouched by writing and print. Ong believes that "this new orality has striking resemblances to the old in its participatory mystique, its fostering of communal sense, its concentration on the present moment" (p. 136). These characteristics of oral communication found in cultures without writing – participatory, communal and present-oriented – are helpful to consider when evaluating websites. Endres and Warnick (2004) argue that, "If Ong's predictions are correct, postings to the internet should differ from print-based communication in how they address their audiences, the ways their discourse is structured, their potential for interactivity, their reliance on context for understanding, and their emphasis on action and on effects. . . . [D]iscourse on the web may be more effective to the extent that it resembles speech rather than print or mass media" (p. 327, 328). Through the immediacy of online community, the emergent churches embraced the new orality by providing places for congregational voices on their websites, resulting in "fostering of communal sense" (see the discussion of community below). The megachurches embraced the new orality on their sites in the ways they address their audience through photos, graphics, and their emphasis on action (see also the discussion of engagement below). Of the three kinds of churches, the vibrant liberal/mainline sites relied the most on traditional models based in writing and print.

Community

Continuing the discussion of themes related to community, I now turn to the ways the websites used three words. A focus on "community," "connect," and "relationship" enable the exploration of key concepts on congregational websites (see Table 4.2). These words were always used positively, expressing the congregations' affirmation of the positive value of community connections and relationships. The emergent churches used these three words the most frequently, indicating a significant priority and orientation for their congregations. They also discussed the concept of community with the most depth and theological grounding. The patterns in the use of these three words also reveal interesting alliances between the types of congregations.

All but one of the vibrant liberal/mainline congregations and all but one of the emergent congregations used "community" to refer to the congregation, while only 13 megachurches did so.[20] However, the megachurches and the emergent churches used the other two words, "connect" and "relationship" much more frequently than the vibrant liberal/mainline churches did. Many of the same themes ran through the way these words were used, but some differences between the three kinds of churches could be seen as well.

Table 4.2. Community

Percent of websites with element [21]	Megachurches (n=20)	Vibrant liberal/mainline (n=20)	Emergent (n=20)	Significance *(p=)*
Use of "community" referring to congregation	65%	95%	95%	.008*
Use of "connect" or "connection"	60%	15%	75%	.000**
Use of "relationship" or "relational"	60%	25%	70%	.010*

The megachurch websites laid out the basic issues related to community. "Hope Chapel is a community of people who love God and are actively committed to loving and caring for one another."[22] This statement revealed two components to Christian community that recur on all three kinds of church websites: loving God and loving others. Sometimes only one of two emphases appeared: "The vision of Christ the Rock Community Church is to grow as a community devoted to passionately pursuing

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[20] Another variable considered the use of the word "community" to refer to the neighborhood or people around the church. There were no significant differences in the way the congregations used "community" in that sense.

[21] These words were examined for their presence on either the homepage or the other pages that were downloaded.

[22] In Hermosa Beach, CA. Downloaded October 26, 2006.

God."[23] The Salem Alliance website affirmed the unfinished journey aspect to community: "We're a community of people who are on a faith journey together. We're all at different stages. None of us have 'arrived.' But together we're experiencing the joy of entering into the love of God."[24] Loving God, loving others, and journeying together occurred repeatedly on the 60 websites in this study. Bayside Covenant Church added a perspective that was found only on megachurch sites, linking "solid teaching and heartfelt worship" as "key ingredients to Christian community."[25] This emphasis on teaching as a part of Christian community parallels the megachurches' greater likelihood to feature a link on the homepage to a statement of belief (see below under "Other Values").

The vibrant liberal/mainline websites coupled their passion for inclusion and diversity with their discussions of community. An example was First Congregational UCC Columbus: "Our faith community seeks to unite persons of all ages, races, nationalities, ethnicities, sexual orientations, mental and physical abilities, socioeconomic levels, and political theological backgrounds."[26] The journey metaphor was present for St. Peter's Lutheran Church, and it was linked with inclusion and caring for others:

> Welcome to St. Peter's Church, an evangelical-catholic communion of diverse people and communities publicly seeking God's nourishment and creatively shaping life in the city. . . . St. Peter's is a caring community, supporting and encouraging its members, the needy of the city, and the arts.[27]

The fact that St. Peter's used the plural form, "communities," as well as the singular form enhanced the emphasis on diversity and inclusion. Another congregation connected life struggles, caring for one another, and serving Christ in its statement about community: "Grace Lutheran Church is a spiritual community that celebrates the

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[23] In Menasha, WI. Downloaded November 8, 2006.
[24] In Salem, OR. Downloaded October 31, 2006.
[25] In Granite Bay, CA. Downloaded November 10, 2006.
[26] In Columbus, Ohio. Downloaded November 8, 2006.
[27] In New York City, NY. Downloaded October 19, 2006.

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gifts of God that empower us to engage in the struggles of life, to care for one another, and to serve Christ where we work or live."[28]

The kind of analysis conducted notes only the presence or absence of the word "community" on the homepage or on other pages. Nineteen of the emergent church sites, the same number as the vibrant liberal/mainline churches, used "community" in the homepage or on other pages. This kind of analysis obscures the fact that the emergent churches used the word community much more frequently on their homepages and other pages. They discussed community in similar ways to the other two kinds of churches, linking community with loving God, caring for people in the congregation, and caring for the needy and others outside the congregation. However, they also discussed community as an integral part of who they are. For example, the Church at Matthew's House said, "To us, church is a way of life – a life lived in the reality of God, in community with each other and in order to bless the world."[29] Reba Place Fellowship said, "We see ourselves as a community trying to believe, teach, and obey everything that Jesus commanded."[30] Wounded Healer Fellowship said, "We believe that we are not so much called to 'go to church' but to 'be the church' as a community."[31] And Vintage Faith said, "Without community we would cease to be a church."[32] These statements are more forceful in identifying community with the essence of the congregation than are found on the other two kinds of church sites.

The emergent churches, according to these sites, based this passion for community in their understanding of theology, illustrated in this quotation: "God exists in perfect community of Father, Son, and Spirit. People were also created to live in community. Missiongathering seeks to build deep and personal faith by serving others in a loving and authentic faith community."[33] This same theological basis was echoed by Mosaic: "God is communal. Because we all bear the image of the creator, the need

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[28] In Minneapolis, MN. Downloaded October 25, 2006.
[29] In Oceanside, California. Downloaded October 19, 2006.
[30] In Evanston, IL. Downloaded October 12, 2006.
[31] In Pembroke Pines, FL. Downloaded October 13, 2006.
[32] In Santa Cruz, CA Downloaded October 17, 2006.
[33] In San Diego, CA. Downloaded October 14, 2006.

for community resides deep in our being. Unfortunately true community rarely 'happens' – particularly in our culture, where heroic individualism rules the day. Community must be nurtured."[34] The Mosaic website, in another place, affirmed that its community was grounded in people, not place: "While we use our space at 9th and Trinity on Sunday evenings for liturgy, conversation, meals and events, we are very aware that our community is present wherever the people of Mosaic find themselves. We are not defined by our meeting together, but by sharing life."[35] The nature of this community, according to The Bridge, must be honest and authentic:

> We value our community-our relationships with each other. We don't want to be a "Hi, how are you,"-"Hi, I'm doing great," cheesy-smile, fake-plastic Jesus kind of place. [sic] We want to really know and care for each other-and grow in our life and faith because of it.[36]

Community on the emergent church websites, then, is presented as connected to the nature of God and must be honest and nurtured intentionally. In addition, according to these sites, this form of community will be connected to mission; the words "mission" and "missional" appeared on several sites as they discussed community,[37] words that are commonly associated with emergent church priorities (Gibbs and Bolger, 2005; Carson, 2005). For example, Vintage Faith said, "We believe the Scriptures teach that the church is not a building or a location, but the people of God on a mission."[38] For the emergent churches, community as described on their websites was grounded in the triune nature of God and thus was integrally connected to their identity as people created in the image of God. Community involved loving God and loving others, being honest on the journey together, sharing life with each other, and serving God in the world.

Community, in short, involved connections, and the megachurch and emergent church websites made that association in similar ways. "Connect" was found on

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[34] In Austin, TX. Downloaded October 14, 2006.
[35] Downloaded October 14, 2006.
[36] In Pontiac, MI. Downloaded October 12, 2006.
[37] "Missional" is a key concept for emergent churches. *Leadership* journal, a journal for evangelical pastors, focused its Winter 2007 issue on "Going Missional."
[38] In Santa Cruz, CA. Downloaded October 17, 2006.

megachurch and emergent church sites in links to various opportunities. It was found in statements of goals and mission statements; for example, the homepage of the emergent congregation Three Nails in Pittsburgh had a brief statement that could perhaps be identified as its mission statement: "Connect. Experience. Live." The word was also used in reference to God: "Connecting people to God . . . That's what New Life [an emergent church] is all about. We want to help you connect to God and form strong relationships with people in your life" (ellipsis in original).[39] Several examples illustrate the use of "connect" in reference to various aspects of congregational life: "Connect with the speaker (not always the pastor) opening up the Bible and taking a real-life look at what these words mean to us today" (The Bridge, an emergent church).[40] "Are you looking to connect more deeply in the church family? Visit any one of the 22 groups that meet Saturday evenings or Sunday mornings" (Salem Alliance, a megachurch).[41] "Connecting at Vineyard Church North Phoenix [a megachurch] is made simple through the many opportunities we offer in ministry, groups, involvement, and community outreach. Join us as we draw closer to God . . . together" (ellipsis in original).[42] The word "connect," then, was used to reference relationship with God as well as a variety of relationships within the congregation.

The megachurches and emergent churches also used "relationship" in similar ways, often referring to a desire to nurture people's relationship with God and with each other. One example on a megachurch site comes from King of Kings Lutheran Church (Missouri Synod), which had a list of 10 values. One of them was "relational discipleship in our everyday lifestyle in our community and in the world."[43] A second megachurch example is North Coast Church (Evangelical Free Church) which mentioned the "host of opportunities for significant and supportive relationships" available for knowing God and growing spiritually,[44] a description that exemplified the

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[39] In Springfield, Missouri. Downloaded October 11, 2006.
[40] In Pontiac, MI. Downloaded October 12, 2006.
[41] In Salem, OR. Downloaded October 31, 2006.
[42] In Phoenix, AZ. Downloaded November 10, 2006.
[43] In Omaha, NE. Downloaded November 2, 2006.
[44] In Vista, California. Downloaded November 1, 2006.

many opportunities for involvement typical of the megachurch sites. As I will show below, the emergent church sites had a unique approach to Christian history, which was visible in a statement on the website of Jacob's Well which expressed a desire to "explore three essential relationships together": "Our relationship to God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit," relationships with people, and "Our relationship to the past and to the future."[45] The use of "relationship" with reference to God and people on the Jacob's Well site was very similar to the use on the megachurch sites. All three of these kinds of churches stressed and enabled the formation of relationships. On the vibrant liberal/mainline church sites, the concept of community was connected to their commitment to inclusive welcome, and on the megachurch sites community and relationships helped people connect with God and with each other, and these relationship nurtured growth in faith. On the emergent church sites, community was intimately connected with their sense of who God is and who they are called to be. Thus, for the emergent churches, more so than for the other two kinds of churches, community, connectedness and relationships are at the core of the way they present the identity on their websites.

Welcoming Newcomers and Enabling Involvement

Continuing the theme of relationships, I now turn to consideration of the ways the congregational websites facilitated welcoming people into their community. All of the analyzed congregations have succeeded at welcoming newcomers and incorporating new people into the life of the congregation. The evidence for this assertion comes from the sheer size of the megachurches, the recognized vibrancy of the liberal/mainline congregations, and the exemplary status accorded to the emergent churches by the emergent network or by each other. All 60 of these congregations, in one form or another on their websites, expressed a welcome to new people and encouraged engagement with the congregation. Eight variables are considered in this section (see Table 4.3) that revealed differences in the patterns of welcoming new

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[45] In Kansas City, MO. Downloaded October 13, 2006.

people. Next, an additional five variables will be considered that showed differences in the way new people were invited to engage in congregational activities.

Table 4.3. Welcoming Newcomers

Percent websites with element	Megachurches (n=20)	Vibrant liberal/mainline (n=20)	Emergent (n=20)	Significance *(p=)*
Use of "welcome" on homepage	45%	85%	75%	.017*
Mission statement on homepage	40%	90%	65%	.003*
Use of "inclusive" or "inclusion" on homepage or other pages	0%	55%	5%	.000**
Link on homepage to information for newcomers	60%	10%	20%	.001*
Link on homepage to questions people might have (e.g., FAQs)	35%	0%	25%	.016*
Use of "relevant" on homepage or other pages	45%	10%	30%	.048*
Use of "seeker" or "searching" on homepage or other pages	0%	10%	40%	.001*

The vibrant liberal/mainline congregations were more likely to use the word "welcome" on their homepages, to have a mission statement on their homepage, and to use the word "inclusive" or "inclusion" or to mention that they were not exclusive. Consider this example:

> First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York extends a simple and unqualified welcome, in Christ's name, to all who seek to join us. We affirm that there can be no exclusiveness within the body of Christ and therefore invite

all children of God into full membership, encouraging the full participation of all members in every area of the life of this congregation.[46]

The same type of language appeared on the homepage of University Lutheran Church of the Incarnation in Philadelphia:

We are an inclusive community, sharing Christ on campus and in the city. Welcome! That is our mission statement, which expresses the ideals we try to achieve: "inclusive community"; "sharing Christ"; "campus and city"; "welcome."[47]

Welcome was expressed verbally, and verbal information about the congregation's mission was given front and center on the homepage. As was shown earlier in the discussion of the word "community," the linking of "inclusive" with "community" was a key concept for these congregations.

In contrast, the welcome expressed by megachurches came in a different form. Less than half of the megachurches used the word "welcome" on their homepages, but 60% of megachurches had links on their homepages specifically for visitors or newcomers (see Table 4.3). Within this variable, four of these megachurches had a link using the word "new," with varied punctuation: "New to Salem Alliance?" "New? to Bayside" [sic], "New to Westover," and "New to James River?"[48] In the case of James River, the words appear on a graphic shaped like a luggage tag, and the graphic was the link to the information for newcomers. The use of the word "new" seems likely to enable newcomers to find the information they need very easily. Four other megachurch sites illustrated the variety of links for newcomers. First Orlando had a statement on its website, "New to First Orlando," followed by five links to a welcome message, worship times, directions and campus map, questions about membership, and a statement about the congregation. Calvary Chapel Downey had "visitors" as one of eight choices on its navigation bar, and North Coast Church had "visitor info" as one of 11 choices on its navigation bar. North Point Ministries had a gateway web page that gave viewers four choices of websites to enter. One of the four was labeled "Before

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[46] Downloaded October 24, 2006.
[47] Downloaded October 25, 3006.
[48] All quotations from megachurch websites in this paragraph were downloaded November 1, 2006.

you attend." Only two of the vibrant liberal/mainline sites and five of the emergent sites had similar links. These links for newcomers and visitors typically took the viewer to web pages that gave basic information such as the times of worship and directions to the church. Additional information for newcomers appeared to be designed to soothe fears about coming, including statements saying that casual attire was welcome, children and youth programs were designed to meet families' needs, questions were welcomed, and people in any place in life were welcome. Seven of the megachurch sites had links on the homepage to questions people might have, often in the form of frequently asked questions. The FAQs often included information for newcomers such as an emphasis on casual clothing, programs for children and youth, and the kinds of things a person can expect from a worship service. In addition, in some cases the FAQs addressed theological questions about the congregation's beliefs. Only five emergent sites had links to questions, and no vibrant liberal/mainline sites had such links.

Megachurches also used the word "relevant" the most frequently on their websites, a word that makes a positive connection between people's everyday lives and the life of the congregation. Therefore, "relevant" implied welcome for newcomers and visitors. On nine megachurch sites, the word was applied to several different components of congregational life and Christian faith. At Salem Alliance, it was applied to the worship services: "We're relevant. Contemporary services with joy, humor and relevance to everyday life."[49] At Christ the Rock, it was applied to expressions of faith: "We desire to be a loving, accepting family of believers who celebrate and demonstrate the life of Christ through relevant and creative expressions of faith."[50] Several times on the megachurch sites, the word "relevant" was applied to the sermons or the teaching. For example, Bayside said, "Weekend services feature messages . . . that are biblically-based, relevant, and life-application oriented."[51] A second example is Branch Creek, which said, "The goal of our teachings is to

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[49] In Salem, OR. Downloaded October 31, 2006.
[50] In Menasha, WI. Downloaded November 8, 2006.
[51] In Granite Bay, CA. Downloaded November 10, 2006.

transform lives by the inspiring and relevant teachings of the Bible."[52] Six of the emergent congregations used "relevant," applying it to faith in Christ, the congregation itself, and the teachings of the Bible. The issue of cultural relevance appeared on two emergent websites: The Bridge website said in a list of nine core values, "Relevance to our culture is not optional,"[53] and the Wounded Healer Fellowship website echoed, "We seek to be a life-giving place where people of multi-cultural backgrounds can connect with the teachings of Jesus in a natural and culturally relevant way."[54] In the two uses on the vibrant liberal/mainline websites, one referred to preaching and the other referred to a class about the teachings of Jesus for our time. The similarities in the use of "relevant" between the three kinds of churches are worthy of note: the teachings of the Bible and preaching were referenced as being relevant in all three kinds of churches, even though the megachurches and emergent churches are usually considered to be evangelical and the mainline churches in this study are liberal. The emergent church emphasis on cultural relevance, found on two websites, shows that the emergent churches may be more likely to seek engagement with our multi-cultural society.

Both the vibrant liberal/mainline congregations and the megachurches seem to be strategic in their offer of welcome on their websites for newcomers and visitors. The vibrant liberal/mainline churches used words to describe their inclusive welcome, and the megachurches used links to helpful information for newcomers and the word "relevant" to encourage visitors and newcomers to believe that the life of the congregation and its teaching would be relevant to their needs. Because the emergent churches have lower numbers in both of these areas, it might appear that their websites are less welcoming of newcomers and visitors. However, much of their welcome lay in their description of community and their invitation for people to join into that community, explored earlier. In addition, they were more likely to use the words "seeker" or to describe people who are searching, and this constituted a part of their form of welcome. While several of the megachurch websites talked about welcoming

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[52] In Harleysville, PA. Downloaded November 15, 2006.
[53] In Pontiac, MI. Downloaded October 12, 2006.
[54] In Pembroke Pines, FL. Downloaded October 13, 2006.

people who have questions and providing answers to those questions, the emergent church websites tended more towards embracing searching as a part of the life of faith. Jacob's Well emphasized that seekers would find a place in God's kingdom rather than answers to all their questions: "Jacob's Well is striving to be a place – like the biblical Jacob's Well – where people who are searching can encounter God and find a place in his kingdom and community and join him in his work in the world."[55] Vineyard Central affirmed that all Christians are still seekers in some way: "In some mysterious way, all of us are seekers, saints, and sinners – though perhaps in varying degrees. No matter what mixture of seeker, saint, and sinner you are you're welcome here."[56] The Bridge said that its mission is "to develop spiritual friendships with seekers and skeptics and be transformed together into relevant, loving, devoted followers of Jesus Christ."[57] These quotations indicate the invitation by emergent churches to seekers and searchers, encouraging them to enter into community so everyone can be transformed together.

A component of welcoming new people is to make it easy for them to get involved. Megachurches have a steady stream of newcomers who must be enfolded in some way into the congregation, and their websites reflected that reality (see Table 4.4). Megachurch websites had more links on their homepage to opportunities for engagement in small groups. Various reasons for the important of small groups were given. For example, Bayside Covenant Church emphasized that Christian growth, life-change, and pastoral care happen best in small groups,[58] Salem Alliance referred to small groups as a place to be "noticed, known and nurtured,"[59] and King of Kings Lutheran Church (Missouri Synod) said, "Small groups are an awesome way to get connected to other Christians in fellowship, Bible study and spiritual growth."[60] Some

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[55] In Kansas City, MO. Downloaded October 13, 2006.
[56] In Norwood, Ohio. Downloaded October 13, 2006.
[57] In Pontiac, MI. Downloaded October 12, 2006.
[58] In Granite Bay, CA. Downloaded November 10, 2006.
[59] In Salem, Oregon. Downloaded October 31, 2006.
[60] In Omaha, NE. Downloaded November 2, 2006.

congregations used different names for small groups: shepherding groups,[61] Life groups (to "experience life-giving community")[62] and LIFE groups ("Learning, Involving, Fellowshipping, Evangelizing"),[63] perhaps indicating a desire to help people think in a new way about small groups or to reframe the purpose of small groups. Two congregations spelled out that they did not offer adult Sunday School classes because they wished to focus their adult Christian education program on small groups,[64] which indicates the priority they place on small groups. Even though these two congregations did not offer adult education classes, which effectively reduced the megachurch sample to 18 for this question, megachurches were still more likely to have links on their homepage to classes for adults. Classes are one more way for people to engage with the life of the congregation. The classes offered by megachurches covered topics related to the Bible and many practical issues, such as Christian principles of money management, discovering one's spiritual gifts, marriage enrichment, and parenting.

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[61] Salem Alliance, Salem, Oregon. Downloaded October 31, 2006.

[62] Fair Haven Ministries, Hudsonville, MI. Downloaded November 3, 2006.

[63] First Baptist Church Orlando, FL. Downloaded November 9, 2006.

[64] North Point Community Church, Alpharetta, GA, on November 8, 2006 and North Coast Church, Vista, CA, on November 1, 2006.

Table 4.4. Encouraging Engagement

Percent websites with element	Megachurches (n=20)	Vibrant liberal/mainline (n=20)	Emergent (n=20)	Significance *(p=)*
Link on homepage to small groups	85%	25%	55%	.000**
Link on homepage to educational opportunities	65%	50%	25%	.037*
Link on homepage to service opportunities	80%	50%	45%	0.052
Use of "grow" or "growth" on homepage	30%	30%	0%	.022*
Mean on homepage				
Imperative verbs	9.7	4.3	6.5	.009*

Later analysis will show that vibrant liberal/mainline and emergent churches talked more often on their websites about justice and servicing the poor, nonetheless, the megachurches offered more links on the homepages of their websites to opportunities for involvement in service. The viewer who clicked on one of these links could access a wide variety of ways to be involved, including helping with the congregation's programs (e.g., children and youth ministries, audio assistance, website maintenance, and aid to congregation members), helping with the congregation's ministries to the local community, and participating in mission trips to help with projects such as Hurricane Katrina relief or overseas mission trips. The three kinds of links found frequently on the megachurch websites – to small groups, educational opportunities, and service opportunities – provided options for involvement that met the needs and desires of a variety of people. In a related finding, the megachurches, along with the vibrant liberal/mainline churches, used the words "grow" or "growth"

more frequently on their websites than the emergent churches did. These words were always used positively, indicating that spiritual growth was a goal or desire of the congregation. In the therapeutic climate of our culture, the desire for spiritual growth seems to be a significant reason why people attend a church, and the megachurches were strategic in offering links to specific opportunities to help that growth happen.

The megachurches were also much more likely to use imperative verbs on their websites (see Table 4.4, bottom half). Some of these verbs were on links and menus, corresponding to the increased number of links found on the megachurch sites: "contact us," "click here for more information," "click here to log in," "download the newest bulletin," "listen online" "connect with opportunities for . . ." and "discover. . . ." These imperative verbs were practical and instructional, yet they also exercised persuasion by encouraging the viewer to engage further with the website. Many of the imperative verbs on megachurch sites were not related to links and exercised persuasion by encouraging engagement with the congregation and its ministries. Some examples are: "Come and celebrate changed lives with us," the Vineyard North Phoenix website invited.[65] "Experience the Heart of the King," encouraged King of Kings Church. "Serve your community . . . Join us as we move into our community to share the love of Jesus in practical ways" (ellipsis in original), North Coast Church invited. "Join us and experience the Joy for the Journey," Mount Corinth Missionary Baptist Church encouraged. The Vineyard North Phoenix homepage had a slideshow with four photos, each with a large imperative verb in a cursive script: Exalt, Evangelize, Encourage, Equip. All of these imperative verbs encourage action and exercise persuasion, which parallel the other data that show the variety of ways the megachurch websites appear to excel in enabling people to get involved. The vibrant liberal/mainline and emergent churches used imperative verbs in similar ways, but in significantly smaller numbers. "Join us in our love of Christ and one another!" invited the First Congregational Church UCC Columbus, a vibrant

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[65] All quotations from megachurch websites in this paragraph were downloaded November 1, 2006.

liberal/mainline congregation .[66] Of the 60 congregations studied, only two had no imperative verbs on their homepages – both of them emergent. Advertisements use a high number of imperative verbs (Cook, 2001), partly because imperative verbs create a feeling of informality and familiarity. They are one form of synthetic personalization, used so commonly in advertisements, that gives the impression that the viewer is being treated as an individual, with individually tailored personal options (Fairclough, 1989; Cameron, 2000; Thurlow & Jaworski, 2006). Thus the high number of imperative verbs on the megachurch websites indicates their embrace of the advertising genre and their strong commitment to encouraging engagement with the congregation in every possible way.

The Visual and the Arts

The patterns shown above related to verbal information and invitation were reinforced by many of the findings regarding visual resources on the websites (see Table 4.5). The megachurch websites had more photos than the other churches, as shown above. They also had many more photos of people as well. Notably, though, while more people in photos on the megachurch websites were looking directly into the camera (called "demand gaze" by Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1999), the difference between the number of photos with direct address on the three kinds of websites was not close to statistically significant. Within this variable, however, a difference could be observed in the way each type of church used photos with direct address on their homepages. Two of the vibrant liberal/mainline congregation homepages had a photo which looked to be the whole congregation: in one case about 70 people and in another case about 100 people.[67] Almost all of the people in these very large groups were looking into the camera. None of the other websites observed for this study had photos with such large groups of people looking into the camera, although many of the megachurches showed photos of the congregation in worship services, looking away

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[66] In Columbus, OH. On November 9, 2006.
[67] Church of the Holy Innocents, San Francisco, CA and Wallingford United Methodist Church, Seattle, WA, observed November 1, 2006.

from the camera. According to Kress and van Leeuwen, these photos with large numbers of people can communicate social distance. More megachurch websites used headshots, a result that was close to being statistically significant. Kress and van Leeuwen argue that the amount of a person's body captured in a photograph can imply the social distance between the viewer and the person viewed in the photo. The more of a person's body we see in the photograph, the greater the social distance implied. Therefore the headshots on the megachurch websites played a part in the communication of intimacy in these very large churches.

Table 4.5. Kinds of Photos and Graphics

Mean on homepage	Megachurches (n=20)	Vibrant liberal/mainline (n=20)	Emergent (n=20)	Significance *(p=)*
Number of photos of people	5.6	1.7	3.0	.032*
Number of people in photos with demand gaze (people looking into camera)	6.2	5.3	3.2	.566
Percent websites with element on homepage				
Use of headshots	60%	35%	25%	.067
Use of nature photos	45%	10%	15%	.017*
Use of photos of buildings	50%	75%	15%	.000**
Use of denominational graphic	10%	45%	5%	.002*

Further, other interesting differences in the use of photographs and graphics across congregations emerged. Megachurches were significantly more likely to use nature photos (see Table 4.5), possibly to communicate peace and serenity, while the vibrant liberal/mainline churches were significantly more likely to use photos of buildings. When emergent church and megachurch websites use photos of buildings on their homepage, they were sometimes photos of the church building and sometimes

photos of buildings in the city where the church is located. When vibrant liberal/mainline churches use photos of buildings, in almost every case they were photos of the church building, indicating that these congregations base more of their identity in their building than the other two kinds of churches. In addition, vibrant liberal/mainline churches were more likely to use graphics associated with their denomination, which parallels their use of links to their denomination. Only a handful of the 20 emergent churches in this study were associated with a denomination, so it is not surprising that only one of them used a denominational graphic. However, 16 of the 20 megachurches were associated with a denomination or group of churches, yet only 10% of them used a denominational graphic. This reinforces the sense of self-sufficiency portrayed on the megachurch sites, an aspect of their identity shown earlier, while the vibrant liberal/mainline churches identities were more closely connected to their denominations.

Emergent churches are known for their embrace of the arts (Gibbs & Bolger, 2005), so it was surprising that the emergent church websites examined for this study had only slightly fewer links to the arts than the other churches (see Table 4.6). The vibrant liberal/mainline congregations had more links to music than either the emergent congregations or the megachurches. Despite the fact that neither of these patterns was statistically significant, differences could be noted in the way the three kinds of congregations talked about the arts on their websites. Only one of the megachurches, Fair Haven Ministries, a Reformed Church in America megachurch, mentioned the arts on the pages that refer to the congregation's philosophy and mission. Fair Haven had a Celebration Arts Department which "seeks to utilize God's gifts of music, drama, and dance in ways that glorify His Name, first and foremost. We strive to lead and edify the worshipers through these forms to enhance their worship experience and draw them closer to our Lord as they offer their individual praises to Him."[68] Two aspects of this statement are worthy of note. First is the instrumental nature of the use of the arts in support of worship. Worship is only one part of congregational life, and both the

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[68] In Hudsonville, Michigan. Downloaded November 3, 2006.

emergent and vibrant liberal/mainline church websites discuss the arts as a part of the whole life of the congregation, not limited to supporting another congregational activity. Secondly, since the Reformation, Protestant churches have privileged music and verbally based arts above the visual arts (Brown, 2005; Dyrness, 2004), and that emphasis is visible in Fair Haven Ministries' emphasis on music, drama and dance, all of which have verbal or musical components. The arts, at Fair Haven, are portrayed as supporting worship, and they stand in the long Protestant tradition of valuing the arts linked to words and music.

Table 4.6. The Arts

Number of websites with element	Megachurches (n=20)	Vibrant liberal/mainline (n=20)	Emergent (n=20)	Significance (p=)
Link to arts	10%	15%	20%	.678
Link to music	15%	45%	25%	.103
Arts mentioned as part of congregational vision or mission[69]	5%	10%	60%	.001*

Two of the vibrant liberal/mainline congregations talked about the arts in the context of their vision or mission. St. Peter's Lutheran Church in New York City mentioned supporting the arts on its homepage, and the arts were also mentioned twice on the web page that described the congregation's mission. One statement put the arts in the framework of dialog with the city: "Through ongoing conversation with God, one another, and a variety of partners in the business, arts, and religious communities, we seek to creatively shape life in the city even as our lives are being shaped by the

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[69] This variable was not a part of the original content analysis. Table 3.2 described the verbal text downloaded from the sites, and after the content analysis was concluded, I searched that text for frequency of discussion of the arts.

Good News of Jesus Christ risen among us."[70] Pasadena Presbyterian Church listed eight aspects of its vision, one of which was "to celebrate the creative arts."[71] In another place, its website stated, "By nurturing the mind and spirit, celebrating the creative arts and engaging in local and global mission, we proclaim hope." Fair Haven Ministries, a megachurch, engaged with the arts to enable worship, while Saint Peter's saw the arts community as a partner in shaping life in the city, and Pasadena Presbyterian Church saw the arts as a way of proclaiming hope.

Twelve of the 20 emergent churches talked about the arts as a part of their vision or mission. Two of them echoed Fair Haven's emphasis on the arts as a way to enable people to worship, and one of them, like Saint Peter's, mentioned the local art community as a place where the congregation desired connection. One emergent congregation met in an arts center, and the events in that arts center were sometimes described on the congregation's website.[72] Two congregations mentioned hosting displays by local visual artists. Several emergent church websites described the arts as an integral part of being a Christian: "Vintage Faith has the arts and creativity in our blood . . . Creativity and the arts won't be something the church does, but something ingrained in who we are." The arts were "profoundly important,"[73] "an essential part of learning, communicating, and understanding,"[74] and "a core means of spiritual expression."[75] This came from a view of God as "an artistic God,"[76] an attribute of God mentioned on three websites. Mission Gathering described it this way:

> God is beautiful and His creation reflects His beauty. God is the ultimate artist. God's beauty can be found in nature. God also created people in His image and likeness as works of beauty. So we are also all creators. When we experience beauty and creativity we connect with God. Missiongathering tries to experience beauty through music, images, art, films, candles, and multi-sensory

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[70] St. Peter's Lutheran Church, New York City, NY. Downloaded October 19, 2006.
[71] In Pasadena, CA. Downloaded November 9, 2006.
[72] Providence Community Church, Plano, TX.
[73] Vineyard Central, Norwood, OH. Downloaded October 13, 2006.
[74] The Bridge, Pontiac, MI. Downloaded October 12, 2006.
[75] Church of the Apostles, Seattle, WA. Downloaded November 8, 2006.
[76] Mosaic, Austin, TX. Downloaded October 14, 2006.

experiences. We value many different forms of creative expression and use a
variety of media to convey God's love.[77]

For the emergent churches, the arts were a part of the voice of the congregation
reflecting back to God something about God's own nature, a key component of
Christian spirituality.

Other Values

Some other notable differences emerged (see Table 4.7). Almost half of the
vibrant liberal/mainline churches used "justice" on their homepages or on pages that
express their mission. Lyndale United Church of Christ in Minneapolis had a brief
mission statement: "A Spirited, Justice-seeking Community."[78] The mission statement
of First Congregregational UCC in Washington, D.C. also used the word:

> Deepening faith and community,
> Living progressive Christian spirituality,
> Embodying and extending God's welcome, healing, justice and love.[79]

Two other vibrant liberal/mainline congregations gave longer descriptions of their
identity and purpose, which brought together many of the themes of this chapter:

> Central Presbyterian Church is a community of disciples of Jesus Christ who
> come together in central Atlanta to worship, serve, and be nurtured by God. We
> come as to a well spring, bringing our thirst and emptiness, only to discover
> that our cup is filled by the living Word, Who sends us to be with those in need
> and to call forth God's justice in a chaotic world.[80]

At Central Presbyterian, justice is embedded in a discussion of community, service,
and congregational life, as it is at Ebenezer Lutheran:

> Ebenezer Lutheran Church has been called together as a community by the
> Holy Spirit to worship God through the Word and Sacraments and to educate
> people in following the example of Jesus Christ. This community is committed
> to mutual support, growth and encouragement for Christ-like service to the

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[77] In San Diego, CA. Downloaded October 14, 2006.
[78] Downloaded October 21, 2006.
[79] Downloaded October 21, 2006.
[80] Downloaded October 26, 2006.

parish and for the advocacy of justice for all oppressed, marginalized, and disenfranchised people.[81]

Justice was central to the forms of service that these congregations valued, supported financially, and engaged in. Justice as a value was closely connected to the liberal/mainline emphasis on inclusion. The liberal/mainline churches were also more likely to use "Jesus" or "Christ" on their homepages. Their desire to extend an inclusive welcome and their commitment to justice were often described as coming from the priorities of Jesus Christ.

Table 4.7. Other Values and Beliefs.

Percent websites with element	Megachurches (n=20)	Vibrant liberal/mainline (n=20)	Emergent (n=20)	Significance *(p=)*
Use of "justice" on homepage or other pages	0%	45%	15%	.001*
Use of "Jesus" on homepage	30%	75%	60%	.013*
Reference to serving the poor on other pages	5%	15%	35%	.044*
Reference to historic Christianity on homepage or other pages	5%	20%	60%	.000**
Reference to openness to questions on homepage or other pages	0%	0%	40%	.000**
Use of "authentic" on homepage or other pages	30%	5%	60%	.001*
Link to statement of beliefs	50%	15%	35%	.063

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[81] In Chicago, IL. Downloaded November 11, 2006.

A striking feature of the megachurch websites was that none of them mentioned justice on their homepage or on pages that addressed the mission and purpose of the congregation. Given the megachurch emphasis on the authority of the Bible and the Bible's frequent mention of justice, this omission raises questions. The popular press has noted a seemingly frequent alliance between megachurches and the Republican Party, which seldom uses the word "justice," as well as a propensity for megachurches to draw on consumerist models rather than affirm the Christian value of justice (*PR Newswire*, 2007; Samad, 2006). The megachurches also had the least frequent use of "Jesus" on their homepages. Taken together, the absence of "justice" and the relatively few uses of "Jesus" may reflect a greater consciousness on the part of megachurches that they are trying to attract people in a secular society to come to church. These characteristics could reflect a greater cultural sensitivity, and, at the same time, they could be signs of the way these congregations have embraced cultural values of consumerism or conservative politics.

Three of the emergent churches mentioned justice on their homepages or other pages. Extended Grace Faith Community was one example: "We are passionately justice-oriented, complementing our acts of discussion and worship with a commitment to radical servanthood in [God's] world."[82] This concern for justice was complemented by the frequency with which emergent churches talked about serving the poor. They were also more likely to make a reference to historic Christianity on their websites. Concern for the poor and an interest in the ancient church have been documented as characteristics of emergent churches (Gibbs and Bolger, 2005), and they are related. Serving the poor can be viewed as an historic Christian spiritual discipline (Jones, 2005). Providence Community Church said it desired to serve the poor because of Jesus' command: "Being convicted by the fact that we should not simply talk about Jesus, but follow Jesus, we take seriously Christ's command to minister to the poor and oppressed."[83] The Gathering said, "We, as a church, believe that since God created

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[82] In Muskegon, MI. Downloaded October 12, 2006.
[83] In Plano, TX. Downloaded October 12, 2006.

humanity with all of our differences, then the church should reflect those differences. We embrace the poor, the rich, the homeless, the widowed, the orphan."[84] Several of the emergent church websites expressed solidarity with the poor and a desire to be in relationship with them, not simply serve them from a distance. One example is the Vineyard Central's website which talked about serving the poor of Norwood, Ohio, by living among them and building bridges.[85] All of these descriptions of service to the poor and connection with the poor give a unique flavor to the emergent church websites. The vibrant liberal/mainline churches talked about justice and inclusion, but less about the poor. The megachurch websites provided opportunities to serve the poor, but did not give a theological framework for those opportunities.

A discussion of history was found much more frequently on emergent church websites than on the other two kinds of church sites, and it took several forms. Several sites talked about wanting to rediscover the priorities of the apostles as expressed in the New Testament, and this exploration contributed to the emergent church commitment to community. The website of The Bridge, in Pontiac, Michigan, said, "From studying the life and writings of the first-century church we've found a group of people who are very committed to one thing: community." The phrases "ancient and modern" and "ancient-future" appeared on several websites, along with text that described congregations' commitment to be relevant in the present and future while drawing on ancient traditions. St. Paul's Collegiate Church at Storrs explained this priority more fully: "SPCC is Ancient-Future in that it recognizes that the appropriate response to post-modernism is not a return to modernism but a rediscovery of the ancient Christian faith, including forms of prayer, meditation, worship, and spiritual formation."[86] Three of the vibrant liberal/mainline congregational sites expressed this same commitment to allow their congregational life to reflect something of the priorities of the early church. This emphasis on Christian history is likely a manifestation of the postmodernist desire to move away from modernism, with its focus so firmly on the present (Grenz, 1996).

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[84] In Amarillo, Texas. Downloaded November 8, 2006.
[85] October 13, 2006.
[86] In Storrs Mansfield, Connecticut. Downloaded November 9. 2006.

In a continuation of the way the emergent church websites revealed a perspective that contrasted with the other two types of churches, the emergent churches talked about the role of questions in the life of faith differently. The megachurches mentioned questions quite often, with their links to frequently asked questions and their willingness to provide Christian answers to the questions that people bring to congregational life. The vibrant liberal/mainline congregations didn't talk about questions very often on their sites; they addressed similar issues when they stressed freedom of conscience, embrace of diverse viewpoints, and a view of the Christian life as a journey involving struggles and challenges. Eight of the emergent church sites affirmed that questions are a part of the life of faith in some form. This variable looked for statements that affirmed doubt or questions as an unavoidable and even welcome part of the journey of faith. "We are unafraid of acknowledging that both faith and doubt are part of our spiritual journey, our lifelong walk with God,"[87] the website of Extended Grace Faith Community said. This congregation went on to assert that they "find more grace in the search for understanding than we do in dogmatic certainty – more value in questioning than in absolutes." In contrast with the megachurch websites, several of which affirmed that they delight in providing answers for people who have spiritual questions, the website of Wounded Healer Fellowship said:

> We, like you, have dreamed of being part of a spiritual community where faith and questions could coincide. Where discussions that don't neatly resolve at the end of the forum are ok. We dreamed of a place where our most honest questions are not dismissed, but openly discussed. We promise that we will be real.[88]

In a related comment, the website of Three Nails affirmed that, "We value the freedom to fail as we step out together in new roles as disciples and leaders . . . not fearing the 'new mistakes' we will make along the way."[89]

This embrace of questions and doubt as a part of the life of faith, and the willingness to make mistakes, was closely related to the concept of authenticity, which

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[87] In Muskegon, Michigan. Downloaded October 12, 2006.
[88] In Pembroke Pines, FL. Downloaded October 13, 2006.
[89] In Pittsburgh, PA. Downloaded November 15, 2006.

appeared most frequently on the emergent church websites as a positive value, often connected to other values already discussed. Highway Church had four words across the top of its website: "Truth. Authenticity. Community. Hope."[90] Authenticity was one of three core values in one congregation (along with "Christ-centered" and "Missional") and one of seven core values in another congregation.[91] Authenticity was often connected to the worship experience. In discussing small groups, the Mosaic website affirmed that "Community provides the context for authentic worship."[92] The Bridge issued an invitation to Sunday worship that provided the option to participate or not: "Join in (if you want) with the band and people around you as we worship God with passion and authenticity."[93] Authenticity was defined vividly by The Gathering: "We as a church are called to be real. We strive to be WYSIWYG (What You See Is What You Get)."[94] Jacob's Well furthered that definition: "We are also authentic. We believe that God is honored and lives are transformed when people are honest, genuine, and real, exposing their brokenness to God and to others. We try not to wear masks."[95] An emphasis on authenticity on the part of emergent churches seems closely connected to their conception of community, relationships, growth in faith, and the need to offer options as a congregation.

The megachurch sites also used the words "authentic" and "authenticity" with some frequency. Three megachurches used these words in their statement of values, one describing worship as authentic and one describing Biblical community as authentic.[96] Salem Alliance's definition of authenticity expressed the subtle but profound way the megachurches portrayed themselves differently than the emergent churches: "Openly admitting our sinfulness and brokenness in accountable

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[90] In Mountain View, CA. Downloaded October 14, 2006.
[91] Providence Community Church, Plano, TX, downloaded October 12, 2006 and The Gathering, Amarillo, TX, downloaded November 8, 2006.
[92] In Austin, TX. October 14, 2006.
[93] In Pontiac, MI. Downloaded October 12, 2006.
[94] In Amarillo, TX. Downloaded November 8, 2006.
[95] In Kansas City, MO. Downloaded October 13, 2006.
[96] King of Kings Lutheran (Missouri Synod), Omaha, NE, downloaded November 2, 2006, and First Baptist Orlando, downloaded November 9, 2006.

relationships, while reaching for wholeness and righteousness through Christ."[97]
Sinfulness and brokenness, in the form of doubt and questioning, were viewed on the
emergent church websites as a part of the journey of faith (e.g., "both faith and doubt
are part of our spiritual journey" on the Extended Grace website[98]). However, on the
megachurch websites brokenness and doubt were viewed as something to be admitted
only in the context of trying to fix them through faith in Christ ("while reaching for
wholeness and righteousness through Christ"). This related to another characteristic of
megachurch sites. More megachurches in this sample had a link on their homepage that
led the viewer to a statement of belief than the other two types of churches do. These
statements of belief usually took a form similar to the Apostle's or Nicene Creed,
including words about God the Father as creator; a description of the life, death and
resurrection of Jesus; a statement that human beings are sinful and need a savior; and a
statement about the authority or inerrancy of the Bible. This emphasis on megachurch
websites on thinking about faith in the framework of a traditional statement of faith fits
with the emphasis on sermons and teaching, and the willingness to provide definitive
answers to questions, which will be illustrated more fully in the next chapter.

Conclusion

This chapter, based on a content analysis of 60 websites, set out to give an
overview of the way different congregation use website features – links and verbal and
visual text – to present their identity and exercise persuasion on their websites. This
portion of the study is descriptive, with the goal of sketching patterns of similarities
and differences among 60 websites. For the megachurches, opportunities on their
websites for engagement appear to be intimately connected with their identity. The
megachurches enable and encourage engagement through many website choices. Their
homepages use more photos, graphics, slideshows, videos, and links to audio, video
and podcasts than the other two types of churches. They have many more internal

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[97] In Salem, OR. Downloaded October 31, 2006.
[98] In Muskegon, MI. Downloaded October 12, 2006.

links. All of these features encourage engagement with the website itself and thus engagement with the ministries and values of the congregation. In fact, based on this analysis of their websites, it would be fair to say that megachurch websites convey a congregational identity that is rooted in being a place where people can connect with small groups, places to serve, classes and seminars where they can learn about the Christian faith and practical issues for everyday life, and can attend worship services that are relevant to everyday life. The number of links to congregational activities on megachurch websites, coupled with the imperative verbs and classes on practical subjects, indicate that people are welcomed into involvement and action, and encouraged to view the Christian faith as applicable in daily life; the websites, through their structure and words, facilitate that kind of engagement. The megachurch websites, because of the relative paucity of their outlinks, come across as more self-sufficient and perhaps more isolated than the other two types of churches.

Like the megachurches, the vibrant liberal/mainline church websites try to welcome people into involvement and action, and encourage people to view the Christian faith as applicable in daily life, but the structure and content of their websites indicate that other priorities hold a higher place for them. Based on their websites, vibrant liberal/mainline churches ground their identities, first and foremost, in their inclusive welcome and their apparent passion for justice, both of which are viewed as coming from the priorities of Jesus Christ. More than the other two types of churches, vibrant liberal/mainline church sites encourage connection with their denominations and community organizations, and they view their buildings and physical location in their communities as central to their identities. While they do encourage engagement with the congregation and its activities and ministries, their links and graphics indicate that they also see themselves as a part of the wider community of their denomination and their town or city.

Emergent church websites indicate the centrality of community, both face-to-face and online, in the identity of these congregations. Their desire for authentic expressions of Christian faith and their willingness to embrace questions and doubt as a

part of Christian faith speaks of an additional component of their identity; according to their websites, they don't want to "cover up" or "mask" real life struggles and challenges. Community for them is rooted in self-revealing honesty and in theological reflection on the nature of Christian community. They also present their sense of identity as grounded in their embrace of historical Christian spiritual disciplines; they mention Christian history more often than the other types of congregations. They see the arts as an integral part of the Christian faith and their own faith communities and as a significant way that God's presence is made known in the world – and again, their understanding of the arts is grounded in theological reflection. They talk about justice and serving the poor with some frequency. On nine website features (photos, graphics, links, etc.), the emergent churches ranked second after the megachurches, showing their embrace of web technology despite having smaller budgets than the megachurches.

The content analysis presented in this chapter has revealed clusters of characteristics corresponding with each of the kinds of churches. In some instances, those characteristics have been shown to be related to each other, and in other instances, the attributes have been described but not situated in a coherent, unified picture of the congregations. The next chapter will present interpretive analysis that looks at these three kinds of congregations in a more holistic way, giving a more unified understanding of each of the three kinds of churches. The analysis in the next chapter will build on many of the characteristics described in this chapter: the multitude of opportunities for engagement on the megachurch sites, the passion for justice and an inclusive welcome on the vibrant liberal/mainline sites, and the strong embrace of community, the arts, historic Christian spiritual disciplines, and service to the poor on the emergent church sites. These characteristics play a significant part in refining an understanding of who exactly these congregations present themselves to be and in a continuing look at the ways their sites exercise persuasion and encourage engagement.

As a first step in developing a comprehensive view of these three kinds of congregations, based on the evidence and analysis presented thus far, I argue that these congregational websites can be compared by visualizing them as different types of lenses. The megachurch websites function like a mirror, reflecting back to the viewer something they want to see in themselves: "You belong, you are worthy and will not be judged. In fact, you will look like the people in these pictures if you participate in the activities of this congregation." So, when the faces are looking into the camera, it is as if the viewer sees himself or herself through that gaze, and the viewer is invited to identify with the people pictured on the sites. In contrast, the vibrant liberal/mainline church websites function more like a window. Their words and photos assure the viewer that they are inclusive, saying in effect, "We know you must be feeling like an outsider, but take a look and you'll see you're welcome here. All of us feel like outsiders in one way or another, so we're all glad this congregation welcomes us." This window on inclusive community enables the viewer to see what this congregation is all about. In yet another contrast, the emergent churches seem to be giving the viewers their own camera, a set of lenses with choices that empower the viewer to produce an artistic object of their own. "Be creative," this camera says. "If you want to join us in making new and beautiful photos for God, we offer a space for you to do that." These lenses that I have identified with the three kinds of congregations – the mirror, the window and the camera – give a preliminary glimpse of the differences in philosophy, strategy and persuasion on the sites.[99] In the next chapter, these differences will become clearer.

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[99] I am indebted to Satina Smith, who thought of these lenses, and described them to me in a personal conversation.