Chapter Three
Research Design

The object of study is congregational websites, specifically the websites of megachurches, emergent churches, and vibrant liberal/mainline churches. Most U.S. congregational websites follow a non-profit domain convention (www.nameofchurch.org). For the purposes of this study, a congregational website is defined as all of the web pages that are associated with the church's URL, www.nameofchurch.org.[11] This study had several stages of data collection. First, in order to develop a deep knowledge of these large and complex sites, over a period of three months I spent several hours daily observing six websites, two sites in each of the three categories, all of them strong exemplars of megachurches, emergent churches, and vibrant liberal/mainline churches. (See Appendix A for a list of the six churches). As I observed the sites, I began to develop a conceptual framework to describe the differences between the three kinds of congregations. Foot, Warnick and Schneider (2005) define a conceptual framework as "a set of constructs derived through retroduction between ideas and evidence" that can then be used for further study for the purposes of theory-building. Retroduction "links inductive and deductive research processes and helps overcome the dualism between them. Retroductive analysis is a dynamic, evolving process of interaction between evidence-based images and theory-derived, analytical frames that can be useful in developing empirically-grounded conceptual representations, and thus in theory-building" (introduction, ¶ 4). The conceptual framework that began to emerge from the observation of the six websites was used to create variables for a content analysis of 60 congregational websites, 20 sites randomly selected from each of the three categories. (See Appendix B for a list of

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[11] In some cases, congregations use two or more domain names, and usually all of them are related to the name of the church. I used common sense to evaluate whether a hyperlink connects the viewer to a different website (an outlink) or whether a link connects the viewer to another page of the congregation's website, even if it uses a slightly different domain name (an internal link). I was able to identify the multiple domain names related to a single congregation because they were usually variations of the name of the congregation.

variables and their definitions, and Appendix C for a list of the 60 churches.) The content analysis continued the retroductive process of conceptual framework development. After the content analysis was concluded, I revisited the six original websites to continue to develop a conceptual framework using rhetorical analysis. Finally, I interviewed 10 website producers by telephone, selecting two to four churches in each of the three categories. I asked these individuals questions about how the website content is chosen or crafted for that particular congregation, particularly in the production of meaning. (See Appendix D for the list of questions used in the interviews). The purpose of the interviews was largely confirmatory, with the expectation that some new insights about power relations might also be revealed. After the content analysis, rhetorical analysis, and interviews were conducted, I revisited all the data in order to conduct a critical analysis, drawing on social semiotic principles.

The analysis of the data is presented in three stages, modeled after Thurlow and Aiello (2007 in press):

(1)   Descriptive text analysis using content analytic procedures, which provides a picture of patterns of similarities and differences among 60 websites. My discussion begins, then, with 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 (chapter four).

(2)   Interpretive text analysis using rhetorical analysis, focused on the six websites I studied for three months, each of them strong exemplars of the three kinds of congregations. This analysis continues to present patterns in features and vocabulary that contribute to the conceptual framework of this study, interpreting the patterns in the ways the features and vocabulary are used on the sites (chapter five).

(3)   Critical text analysis drawing on semiotics and particularly social semiotics. The patterns that emerged through content analysis and rhetorical analysis were considered again, with the addition of data

from the interviews. The goal was to consider the links between the semiotic strategies used and the political-cultural economy of the congregations studied, including the power relations which frame the practices of congregational branding (chapter six).

These three stages of data analysis provide a picture of the websites of the three kinds of congregations that is multidisciplinary and multi-perspectival. On the one hand, these analyses provide different lenses to understand the website texts and the corresponding congregations. At the same time, the analysis gets progressively "deeper" with each approach. That is, the content analysis identifies manifest content on the sites, the rhetorical analysis considers issues of meaning construction, and the critical analysis incorporates the producers and the social and cultural settings that influence website content. The process of retroduction continued throughout the research, with ideas from one part influencing other aspects of the study, with the goal of presenting a unified picture of the ways these congregations express their organizational identities and exercise persuasion.

Descriptive Analysis using Content Analysis

Content analysis, the "systematic, objective, quantitative analysis of message characteristics" (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 1), was used to evaluate a representative sample of websites. Empirical inquiry into the content of communication dates back at least to the 1600s, when church officials examined the content of newspapers and other documents looking for heresy. With the growth of newspaper publishing in the last century, content analysis has also increased in popularity as a research method (McMillan, 2000). This method can be used to examine a wide variety of characteristics of messages. It is a "technique for making inferences from a focal text to its social context in an objectified manner. . . . Content analysis allows us to construct indicators of worldviews, values, attitudes, opinions, prejudices and stereotypes, and compare these across communities" (Bauer, 2002, p. 133, 134). In this study, content analysis was used to code for a wide range of linguistic, visual and technical/material

resources on congregational web sites. A number of scholars have written about the ways to adapt classic content analysis to the web, among them Bauer (in addition, see Herring, 2004; McMillan, 2000; Mitra, 1999: Van Selm and Jankowski, in press), and I drew on their work. One of the specific issues related to content analysis of web texts, delineated by Van Selm and Jankowski, is the need for coders to conduct analysis at the same time and at the same kind of computer/monitor or to use archived websites, because web content changes and looks different on different machines. For this project, I coded websites live, and I also archived all homepages of the sites I examined.

Bauer (2002) describes four research strategies that can be adopted in content analysis. Three of them are relevant for this study. First, comparisons between different texts can reveal patterns of similarities or differences. In this study, content analysis revealed such patterns in the philosophy and strategy of the three kinds of congregations – in particular the linguistic and visual resources used. Second, Bauer notes that content analysis can be used to construct indices, which are signs that are causally related to some other phenomenon. Indeed, the identified patterns were indicators of the congregational values and priorities. Third, Bauer writes that content analysis can be used to reveal "maps of knowledge" that are embedded in texts. To do this, "content analysis may have to go beyond the classification of text unity and work towards networking the units of analysis to represent knowledge not only by element, but also in their relationships" (Bauer, 2002, p. 135). These maps of knowledge overlap with the ideologies and worldviews of the congregations. I have sought to make observations about the relationships in my data and to formulate maps of knowledge related to these three kinds of congregations and their philosophy and strategy.

To increase confidence in the data collected, I conducted inter-coder reliability tests. After the variables were formulated, I recruited a web designer who frequently designs congregational websites to work with me as a second coder. She and I met for seven hours over the course of a week to test the variables I had created. We coded several congregational websites together, then we coded nine sites at the same time but

in different rooms. After every two or three sites, we compared our results and discussed the definitions of the variables. As a result of those hours of working together, I deleted some variables, combined, changed and added some others and rewrote some of the definitions, resulting in a total of 110 variables. Then, over the course of the next four weeks, I coded 16 sites in each category of congregation (a total of 48). Then my second coder and I coded four of these sites in each group simultaneously (a total of 12 sites, 20% of the total) to check for inter-coder reliability for each variable.

Inter-coder reliability was calculated in two ways. Agreement records the percentage of instances in which both coders observed either the presence or absence of a variable. Scott's Pi is a statistical calculation that factors in the consideration that random chance would result in a certain percentage of identical codes. Table 3.1 shows the breakdown for the inter-coder reliability for the variables. The totals for two of the variables were combined, resulting in a total of 109 variables, four of which were eliminated after the inter-coder reliability tests. Intercoder reliability above 60% agreement, with Scott's Pi of greater than .3, is viewed as acceptable in content analysis, particularly in this instance, where 89% of the remaining variables have a percent agreement of above 80%, with Scott's Pi of greater than .65 (Neuendorf, 2002).

Table 3.1. Intercoder Reliability

Percent agreement	Scott's Pi	number of variables
100%	1.0	46
greater than 90%	greater than .8	31
greater than 80%	greater than .65	16
greater than 70%	greater than or equal to .5	8
greater than 60%	greater than .3	4
less than 60%	less than .2	4 (eliminated from study)

Of the 105 remaining variables, 79 examine characteristics of the website's homepage: 51 variables describe features of the homepage such as number and kind of photos, graphics, types of information present, and the labels of links; and 28 variables examine vocabulary or concepts expressed in the verbal text on the homepage. The remaining 26 variables examine verbal text on other pages and are almost identical to the 28 variables that examine text on the home page. (See Appendix B for a list of the variables and their definitions.) I looked for other pages on the websites that were explicitly for newcomers/visitors, that expressed the congregation's mission statement, or that listed Frequently Asked Questions and their answers, and I copied the text into a Word file. Then I searched for the words and concepts in the variables. In the Word file, I added any text off the homepage that described the congregation's ministry in some detail. I combined all the text I copied off the sites into Word files for each of the three kinds of churches. Notably, the combined texts from the emergent church websites was longer than the text from the other two types of congregations. This was so because emergent churches described their mission on their websites in much more detail than the other two kinds of churches, whereas several of the megachurches offered videos that described their congregations. While I coded for the presence or absence of video, I did not look at video verbal content.

Table 3.2. Verbal Text Retrieved from Websites

Type of Church	Word count of verbal text related to mission
Emergent Churches	27,724
Megachurches	16,627
Vibrant Liberal/Mainline Churches	14,621

After coding the 60 websites, I entered the data into an Excel spread sheet and calculated the mean score for each variable for each of the three kinds of congregations. I used the statistical analysis software SPSS to calculate a oneway

Anova for each variable, which indicates the significance of the difference between the means, e.g. whether or not the differences between the means are likely to have occurred by chance or whether they are likely be able to be attributed to the differences between the websites.

<div align="center">Interpretive Analysis using Rhetorical Analysis</div>

Rhetorical analysis begins with a close reading of the text to be examined, with "patience in the search for details" (Reid, 1944, p. 422), which enables the rhetorical scholar to unpack discourses and evaluate why they are persuasive. Good rhetorical analysis has two components: attention to the particular, specific and local; and an affinity for normative conclusions (Leach, 2002). In order to reach those conclusions, rhetorical scholars consider the audience, the type of discourse, and the exigence of the discourse, which is the imperfection, obstacle, or urgency that lies behind the motivation for the text (Leach). Another set of issues to be considered comes from the work of Aristotle (1991): ethos, the credibility of the author; pathos, the appeal to emotion; and logos, the validity of the logic that undergirds the arguments used. Analyzing the argument includes considering the history of the issues that underlie the argument and noting the structure of the argument, requiring an appraisal of the techniques used and the ends advocated, as well as the immediate and long-range effects of both (Andrews, 1990). Andrews lists several dozen questions that may be used as a part of the rhetorical analysis of a text. The questions that are relevant to websites include the following, which have been adapted for this study: What political, social, or economic factors, and what cultural values and practices, are relevant to the text? What is the implied purpose of the text? What are the individual arguments and how are they constructed? What forms of support are used to promote conclusions? What can be discerned about desirable audience response? How can the text's tone, level of complexity, and texture be described? What are the social and cultural elements within the text that bear upon ethos formation? What devices, techniques, or strategies are employed to enhance the ethos? All these questions, as applied to

websites, assume that "texts" in general, and the texts under study include linguistic, visual and technical/material resources.

After I conducted the content analysis of 60 websites, I returned to the six websites that I had examined for three months before the content analysis. (See Appendix A for a list of the six congregations.) I used the questions listed above and revisited the issues explained in the earlier section, "The Rhetoric of the Web." I also began a more systematic study of rhetorical analysis and its many theories in order to find language and concepts to explain the differences I had observed. I chose three rhetorical theories – genre, audience, and heteroglossia – and one concept – community – to use as frameworks for discussion of the differences and similarities I observed. As is common in rhetorical analysis, I drew both on rhetorical theorists and also on theorists with roots in other fields, in this case, Kress and van Leeuwen (1999), who are critical discourse analysts. The many details I had observed in the three months of concentrated study of the sites fueled this analysis, giving me the particular, specific, and local observations needed for the analysis, and the theorists I used helped me make normative conclusions about the ways the congregations use their websites to present identities and exercise persuasion (Leach, 2002).

Critical Analysis

For the critical analysis, I revisited all the data gathered and the conclusions reached through content analysis and rhetorical analysis. I also considered the information gained in the interviews. I looked at this data using semiotic and social semiotic analysis. Semiotic, or semiological, analysis "provides the analyst with a conceptual toolkit for approaching sign systems systematically in order to discover how they produce meaning" (Penn, 2000, p. 227). The key questions asked by semioticians are: What kinds of signs are used in human communication? In what ways do they represent meaning, construct meaning, and influence our understanding of reality? In what ways do they contribute to our values and priorities without our engagement of conscious thought? These questions shaped and informed the critical

analysis of websites in this study. By observing the distinctions between denotation, connotation, and myth/ideology, semiological analyses can make apparent the relationship between "surface content" and "interpretive content." "The semiological account sharpens and makes explicit that which is implicit in the image" (Penn, 2000, p. 241). Barthes (1977) writes that "the viewer of the image receives at one and the same time the perceptual message and the cultural message" (p. 36). In the comparative analysis of websites from the three kinds of congregations, semiological analysis helped in discerning the cultural message or myth – particularly as it relates to organizational identity and persuasion/engagement – being presented on the websites. Because these congregations are situated in a capitalistic consumer culture, the cultural messages regarding consumption that lie behind so many forms of communication had to be considered.

I also drew heavily on social semiotic principles to conduct the critical study of stage three. In the area of representational meaning, social semioticians consider the narrative, conceptual, and symbolic structure of both photos and verbal text. When considering interactive meaning, the analyst considers the way the viewer or reader is invited to engage with images and verbal text. This includes the point of view in photographs, and the distance from and the gaze of the people pictured. When considering the compositional meaning of linguistic and visual resources, the researcher explores the informational value, framing, and salience of the semiotic resource, as well as the modality, which considers the issue of how true or how real a given sign or set of signs within a text or image should be taken to be (van Leeuwen, 2005; Jewitt and Oyama, 2001). Two aspects of the work of the semiotician are (a) to collect, document and catalogue semiotic resources, including their history and (b) to examine the ways these resources are used in specific contexts and how people talk about them in these contexts, how they are planned, taught, justified, and critiqued (van Leeuwen, 2005). In the third stage of this research, social semiotics provided a framework for integrating all the data with the interviews of site producers. As van Leeuwen has indicated, semiotic resources are used in "specific historical, cultural and

institutional contexts" (2005, p. 3). The interviews helped to explore the specific settings in which the sites were created, and shed light on how site producers plan, teach, justify, and critique the way they use semiotic resources.

An additional contribution of social semiotics to this study of congregational websites lies in the issues of ideology and power relations. The cultural narratives or myths that are presented on websites work to establish, maintain, and/or change power relations for someone or some group of people and their worldview. Social semiotic analysis situates semiotic resources in a social environment where power is at work, and this analysis helps to address a series of questions. In what ways do the cultural messages or myths on congregational websites establish power? In what ways do they maintain or change power? Who are the people who benefit from that power? In what ways do they benefit? Who is being dominated or exploited? In what ways do these power relations on congregational websites mirror power relations in the wider society? In what ways are these power relations distinct from the wider society and unique to congregations? What are the connections between power relations and economic interests, and in what ways do congregations engage in capitalistic pursuits? Is religion being commodified? These are some of the questions that I considered in the critical analysis of the websites, integrating the results of the whole study with the interviews by site producers. It may be tempting to view congregational websites as sources of information and windows into congregational culture, providing informational resources that are quite free of power relations, but the convictions of social semiotics force us to delve deeper into the cultural and ideological dynamics at work.

Bounding the Sample

I began my data collection by observing six congregational websites in order to generate variables for the content analysis of a larger number of sites. These same six websites provide the data for the rhetorical analysis, presented in chapter five. I chose websites from congregations which serve as strong exemplars of each of the three types

of congregations considered in this study. Of the megachurches in the United States, two stand out as leaders of the movement: Willow Creek Church in the suburbs of Chicago and Saddleback Community Church in Orange County, California (Wilson, 2000; Yancey, 2005; the Church Report, 2005), and I chose them for analysis. For emergent churches, a core group of churches were identified as follows. *Christian Century* magazine (2005) reported that the emergent movement's four-person board of directors recently appointed a national coordinator of the movement, Tony Jones. With the board of directors, Jones established a website, emergentvillage.org, which listed eight congregations considered to be emergent.[12] Jones, a senior research fellow at Princeton Theological Seminary, reported to me in an email on October 22, 2005, that in his own research, he was studying eight emergent congregations, five of them the same as the ones on the website and three of them different. In order to select two websites to study in depth, I began by listing the five congregations that appear both on emergentvillage.com and on Tony Jones's list, concluding that all five must be strong exemplars of the movement because they appear on both lists. Because I wanted the most complex and rich websites in this category in order to have the maximum possible amount of written and visual text to study, I examined the five websites and counted the total number of pages on each website.[13] The number of pages I was able to find on each website ranged from 20 to 110, and I chose the two sites with the highest number: Cedar Ridge Community Church in Maryland (110 pages on its site) and Solomon's Porch in Minneapolis (70). For vibrant liberal/mainline churches, I chose from among the congregations identified by Wellman (2002), who had selected congregations based upon recommendations by denominational leaders, so the sample represented strong exemplars of these churches. I have attended worship services several times at one of the churches, so I ruled it out, not wanting my personal experience to influence the way I studied the websites. Of the remaining five, I counted the number of pages I could find on their sites, again because I wanted websites with

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[12] On October 1, 2005.
[13] On June 13, 2006.

the greatest possible amount of text and images to study. I counted 26 to 70 pages on the five websites. Two of the churches had 70 pages, so I chose them: St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco and Seattle First Baptist.

For the content analysis presented in chapter four, I first constructed larger samples for each type of congregation, then selected 20 congregations randomly. For megachurches, I accessed Scott Thumma's database at Hartford Seminary of more than 1200 megachurches, some in Canada, and some with 1800 to 2000 members in attendance on Sunday mornings. I ruled out the Canadian churches and those with less than 2000 in attendance, because 2000 is the cutoff in the most commonly used definition of megachurch (Chaves, 2004). I wanted churches that were generally evangelical in theology; very few megachurches are liberal, but Thumma's sample does include a small number, mostly in mainline denominations. Thumma's database can be sorted by denomination. I randomly chose congregations from denominations that have historically been viewed as evangelical, plus a few nondenominational churches.[14]

To construct the larger sample of emergent churches, I studied the websites of the 11 emergent churches mentioned on www.emergentvillage.org and in Tony Jones's research. Several of those 11 sites have lists of other churches they consider to be emergent. I collected the lists of all the churches named on those sites, added them to the 9 sites remaining on the original list after I had chosen 2 for close analysis at the beginning of my research, resulting in a list of 35 churches. I removed one from consideration because it is a megachurch, two others because they are outside the

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[14] I downloaded the database on July 17, 2006 from http://hirr.hartsem.edu/org/faith_megachurches_database_denom.html. I randomly chose one congregation each from the following denominations that traditionally draw on evangelical theology: Foursquare, Assemblies of God, Calvary Chapel, Christian Missionary Alliance, Christian Reformed Church, Evangelical Covenant, Evangelical Free, Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, Missionary Baptist, Church of the Nazarene, Presbyterian Church in America, Reformed Church in America, and Vineyard Churches. I randomly chose two Southern Baptist Churches because of the very large number of SBC churches on the database. I also randomly chose four nondenominational churches because of the large number of nondenominational churches on the list. To make random choices for this and the other parts of the sample, I used www.randomizer.org.

United States and one other because its website was not functioning. I then randomly selected 20 from the remaining congregations.

To assemble a list of vibrant liberal/mainline churches, I asked leaders of gay and lesbian advocacy groups in six mainline denominations to identify congregations they consider to be vibrant.[15] This strategy was used because the issue of gay rights is currently one of the defining issues in the liberal-evangelical divide (Rogers, 2006; Myers and Scanzoni, 2005; Marston, 2005). Adding the four websites from the Wellman (2002) research that were as yet unselected in this research, I was able to assemble a list of 141 liberal/mainline churches judged by leaders within their denominations as vibrant. After ruling out several whose websites were not functioning or which did not have websites, I randomly selected 20.

For the interviews of website producers, I began by contacting the six congregations I studied in the most depth by email or by phone in order to arrange interview times. I was able to conduct phone interviews of the website producers of three of those six congregations. I then began contacting congregations from the list of 60 congregations studied in the content analysis, both by email and by phone. I chose congregations whose websites had particularly intrigued or interested me. I was able to conduct an additional seven phone interviews, resulting in a total of 10 website producers (two from one emergent congregation), who represent two emergent congregations, three vibrant liberal/mainline congregations, and four megachurch congregations. The interviews ranged from 20 minutes to one hour. Because of the restrictions required by the Internal Review Board of the University of Washington, I was not able to record the interviews. Instead, I took notes as I talked with the site producers by phone. (See Appendix D for a list of the questions used in the interviews.)

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[15] The denomination of the advocacy groups that responded and the number of churches they nominated: American Baptist, 9; United Methodist, 24; Presbyterian Church (USA), 15; UCC, 36; Episcopal, 11; Evangelical Lutheran, 42.