

# Portraits of the Future Church: A Rhetorical Analysis of Congregational Websites

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*The websites of six American Protestant Christian congregations were examined using rhetorical analysis. Three types of congregations were selected because they represent possible future directions for the American church. The two megachurches drew strongly on metaphors of home and family, emphasizing places for connection within the larger congregation. They offered multiple options for engagement within a strongly unified congregational voice. The two vibrant liberal/mainline churches emphasized inclusion and diversity, while drawing on more traditional genres of communication on their websites. The two emergent church websites resembled eco-friendly, artsy coffee houses, with multiple voices on the website offering opportunities for engagement in virtual community and options for face-to-face community. All three kinds of congregations drew on and reified American cultural values, but in distinctly different ways, demonstrating that the future church in the United States will likely continue to be firmly embedded in various movements within the culture. **Key words:** congregations, websites, rhetorical analysis, megachurch, emergent church, liberal mainline Protestant church*

Shifts in church attendance patterns in the United States since the 1960s (Noll, 2001; Finke & Stark, 2005; Ostling, 2000; Hoge, Johnson, & Luidens, 1994; Hunter, 1987) have precipitated an extensive literature about the future of the American church. A 1991 book, *The Once and Future Church* (Mead), anchored a series of books from the same publisher, The Alban Institute, that address the future of the American church. Additional titles from other publishers reveal a growing

concern among congregational leaders about the relevance of the church in changing times and the implications of the shift in church attendance patterns; such titles include *Future Church: Ministry in a Post-seeker Age* (Wilson, 2004), *The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church* (McNeal, 2003), *Changing Church: How God is Leading His Church into the Future* (Wagner, 2004), and *The Postmodern Parish: New Ministry for a New Era* (Kitchens, 2003). These and other books, published by major religious presses, have been accompanied by numerous magazine articles and seminars for ministers focused on similar topics. This study focuses on three kinds of Protestant congregations which are increasingly influential and therefore may indicate future directions for the Protestant church in the United States. Megachurches, defined as those congregations with more than 2000 people in worship services each week, have grown significantly in numbers and in influence in the past decade (Chaves, 2004; Thumma, Travis, & Bird, 2005; Mahler, 2005). Vibrant liberal/mainline churches are entering into the public sphere because of the growth of a progressive religious voice in politics (Wellman, 2002; Wallis, 2005). Emergent churches have gained recent media attention, both in the religious and secular press, because they represent a rapidly growing form of evangelicalism which, with their young demographic and conscious engagement with contemporary culture, may represent the future – or a future – of the church (Bader-Saye, 2004; Crouch, 2004; Carson, 2005; Gibbs & Bolger, 2005).

The object of analysis in this study is congregational websites, which collect in one place many kinds of information about the congregation's philosophy and strategy that used to be, and sometimes still is, dispersed all around church buildings: welcome brochures that used to sit on a table near the church entrance, photos that used to appear on physical bulletin boards, invitations to involvement that used to be found in weekly worship bulletins, sermons that used to be on tape in the church library, and articles by church staff and leaders that used to appear in monthly newsletters (Larsen, 2001; Larsen, 2004; Dart, 2001). This body of information, patchworked

together on congregational websites, presents multiple aspects of congregational life and gives insight into the congregation's philosophy and strategy. The way the information is visually organized and represented on congregational websites provides additional information about the way the congregational leaders view its identity, as do hyperlinks to pages within the website and to organizations outside the congregation. As a Presbyterian minister who oversaw a congregation's communication during the time that websites came on the scene, I saw the significance of website communication for organizations, and I became convinced of the importance of careful analysis of websites. Communication scholars need to undertake such analysis in part because congregations, like all organizations, are increasingly using websites to present their identities,<sup>1</sup> and in part because life online is becoming an ever increasing part of daily life, particularly for the younger generations.<sup>2</sup> The study of websites provides a wealth of information about congregations and, in addition, provides a connection to the future of the church because so many younger people—often called the church's future—get information from online sources.

Three research questions shaped this study:

- (1) In what ways do congregations present their organizational identity on their websites?
- (2) In what ways do congregations exercise persuasion by encouraging and enabling engagement on their websites?
- (3) In what ways do these presentations of identity and patterns of engagement reveal aspects of the future church?

With regards to identity, "Who are we and why does it matter?" are central questions for all organizations, including congregations (Hatch & Schultz, 2002; Moingeon & Ramanantsoa, 1997). Congregations articulate their identity explicitly in statements of mission, purpose, or vision, and they also express their identity more indirectly through all their discourse, including

visual discourse and links on websites. In the area of persuasion, Christian congregations have the biblical mandate to “make disciples” (Matthew 28:19, New Revised Standard Version), to persuade non-believers of the significance of the Christian faith and to nurture believers in growing discipleship. Because congregational websites are constructed to address two primary audiences – potential visitors and regular attenders – they engage in various kinds of persuasion connected to discipling. The third research question, related to the future of the church, links the discussion of the church’s future with the specific communication tool, websites, which are increasingly used by congregations and the younger generations. All of these research questions enable reflection on the way Web-based communication functions, with some parallels to earlier forms of communication, but with new aspects that come from the patchworked, visual, and hyper-linked characteristics of websites. Discerning the significance of the similarities and differences with earlier forms of communication is one of the challenges of new media for communication scholars, and this study models one way to use traditional rhetorical analytical methods to study a new form of communication.

### **Rhetorical Analysis of Websites**

In 1998, when organizations were just beginning to understand the significance of the Internet, Esrock and Leichty (1998) wrote that the World Wide Web “potentially offers an organization opportunities to move beyond passive forms of self-presentation to more active forms of agenda setting with relevant publics” (p. 309). Their words have proven prescient, but academic researchers, including rhetoricians, have been slow to study organizational websites. Winter, Saunders, and Hart (2003) present two reasons why the importance of websites in forming perceptions of organizations has been overlooked in academic research. First, early websites were designed by human factors<sup>3</sup> and internet design experts, rather than by professionals trained in presenting corporate identity. Second, most early website research focused on usability and user satisfaction issues. Only

very recently have organizational websites become an object of study for the purpose of evaluating organizational self-presentation. Winter et al. write, "Websites are on-stage work areas where a performance is given to an actual or implied audience of potential customers, employees, suppliers, partners, and regulators . . . They provide frames of symbolic representations that inform and lure these potential stakeholders in to take a closer look" (p. 311). Pudrovska and Feree (2004) echo some of the same themes: "[T]he analysis of Web sites provides a new and useful form of data about an organization's identity and priorities because, unlike media representations of the group, it is self-directed. . . . Thus a Web site provides an open space for self-representation to the rest of the world" (p. 118). This study is based on the conviction that congregational websites are self-directed performances of organizational identity, designed to provide frames of symbolic representation of the congregation's philosophy and priorities (see Young and Foot [2005] for another study based on similar convictions).

This study stands in a long tradition; rhetoric has been used to study Christian communication since the early days of the Christian faith (Murphy, 1974). Throughout history Christians have usually been on the forefront in using new forms of communication in order to communicate the Christian faith; they were among the first to use the printing press, radio and television (Finke & Iannaccone, 1993). As Christians have now embraced the web, rhetorical principles are still helpful to analyze the ways they communicate. Warnick (2001) argues that rhetorical criticism can be fruitfully applied to illuminate the workings of many forms of new media "to the extent that electronic messages are designed, ordered, and organized to privilege certain ideas and to influence the thinking of their users and readers" (p. 63-64). Applying rhetorical criticism to websites requires some new emphases. New media literacy requires an understanding that the relationships between verbal and visual texts are dialogic, and that visual texts give readers a sense of agency and create possibilities of involvement (Hocks, 2003). According to Helmers (2001), applying rhetorical criticism to

electronic media requires the ability to evaluate the “texts of everyday life” (p. 453), because websites use so many everyday forms of communication, such as casual photos, testimonials, and informal speech. Brummett and Bowers (1999) note that rhetorical strategies may be “hidden in the texts of everyday appearance” (p. 117), which parallels Ong’s (1982) observation that with the rise of electronic media we may be entering into a period of secondary orality. Verbal text on websites may be more effective when it has aspects of everyday speech—active voice, first and second person address, first names, and accessible style—rather than the more formal address of television and news media (Endres and Warnick, 2003; Warnick, Xenos, Endres and Gastil, 2005), and these characteristics need to be observed in a rhetorical study.

This study explores the genres from everyday life evoked on the websites in order to discern the rhetorical strategies used by the congregations to construct their identities and position themselves to be churches for the future. Genre as a rhetorical concept originated in the writings of Aristotle (1991), who described three genres of speeches. Genres are “groups of discourses which share substantive, stylistic, and situational characteristics” (Campbell & Jamieson, 1978, p. 20). Studying genre reveals the conventions and affinities a text shares with others, and it can also reveal the unique aspects of that particular text. One way to discuss genre is to compare it to the concept of family resemblances. A family of texts coalesces into a genre in the same way as members of a family share some, but not all, characteristics, such as appearance, personality, and speech patterns (Jasinski, 2001). This comparison with family resemblances allows us to understand that a family of texts will have some common characteristics but will also have some diversity in style, argument, structure, and situation (Mandelbaum, 1965; Condit, 1985; Fishelov, 1993).

The culture of the congregations in this study is illuminated through the study of the genres used on their websites. Miller (1984) argues that the value of genre study does not lie in the construction of a taxonomy. Instead, evaluating the genres that are evoked gives the reader the ability to discern the action

the text is used to accomplish. She argues that an inductive approach helps to identify the undercurrents that lie behind a text; genres serve as “an index to cultural patterns” (p. 165). Genres have the capacity to “‘naturalize’ what they index” (Kamberlis, 1995, p. 147), and many genres have become so natural to us that we forget we are dealing with discursive forms that construct our perceptions of the object being described (Jasinski, 2001). Jamieson and Campbell (1982) describe the way genres can work together as “dynamic fusions” and as “constellations” of stylistic and situational elements that function strategically as responses to the exigencies of the situation (p. 146). These fusions and constellations result in hybrid genres that serve more than one purpose (Lessl, 1985).

Websites are, in themselves, a genre, with accompanying expectations: at their most basic, almost all websites will have verbal and visual elements and hyperlinks. The more complex members of the genre will add additional elements, such as photo montages, videos, slideshows (where photos or graphics take turns filling one space), downloadable music files, links in the form of graphics rather than words, and opportunities for virtual community (blogs, online polls, chat, messageboards, groups, etc.). The organizational website is a subset within the website genre which presents an organization’s identity, priorities, values, and goals (Esrock & Leichty, 1998; Winter et al, 2003). Congregational websites fit into the organizational website genre, and they vary widely in complexity and quality. Websites can easily be seen as hybrid genres because of their patchworked nature (Döring, 2002). Congregational websites in particular are likely to be hybrid genres because they draw on material that used to be, and often still is, scattered all over the church building. Each of the six websites I examined fit within the organizational website genre, but each had characteristics of other genres as well. Therefore, each of these websites is a hybrid genre. This assessment is helpful because it enables the viewer to see more clearly the way the church’s perspective was crafted.

A second aspect of the rhetorical analysis in this study focuses on the congregations’ use of metaphors on their web-

sites. Metaphor has traditionally been defined as a verbal figure involving the transfer of meaning associated with one word to another (Leach, 2002; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Carpenter, 1990; Ivie, 1987; Leff, 1983; Osborn, 1967). This transfer can take place between images as well as words, and this kind of transfer is becoming increasingly important as visual communication moves increasingly into the forefront (Hayles, 2002). Burbules (1998) discusses the significance of reading hyperlinks on a website as metaphors; for example “a link from a page listing Political Organizations to a page on the Catholic Church might puzzle, outrage, or be ignored – but considered as a metaphor it might make a reader think about politics and religion in a different way” (p. 111). Burbules notes that web links using familiar shapes can be metonymic because a particular icon begins to stand in place for a particular web page, and web links often have characteristics of synecdoche because links as gateways to information associate parts with wholes. Clusters of links can thus influence the ways people think about subjects. These all have their own sort of “deceptive naturalness” (Burbules, p. 117), and a thorough rhetorical analysis of congregational websites will expose deceptive naturalness of these tropes in verbal and visual texts and in the structure of links.

In addition to genre and metaphor analysis, analysis of visual rhetoric plays a role in this study. Some scholars have argued that visual texts exercise persuasion through emotional appeals (Grossman & Till, 1998; Kim, Lim, & Bhargava, 1998), but increasingly scholars are describing the ways that visual texts create arguments (Messaris, 1997; Birdsell & Groarke, 1996; Jamieson, 1992; McQuarrie & Mick, 1999, Morgan, 2005). Scott (1994) believes that visual texts make “complex, figurative arguments” (p. 252), and she argues that a cognitive approach is appropriate for the analysis of visual texts. She goes on to note that visual texts can be carefully constructed to reflect the conventions of a specific culture. Thus, visuals have to be considered in the context of specific contexts, where shared history results in shared interpretations, and knowledge of context and cultural assumptions is required to analyze visual



texts and bring to light the arguments that are being made. The websites in this study make arguments using verbal and visual texts working together, and they use metaphors and references to everyday genres to make those arguments as well.

For this study, I chose six congregational websites, strong exemplars of each of the three American Protestant Christian movements described earlier. Of the megachurches in the United States, two stood out as leaders of the movement: Willow Creek Church in a suburb of Chicago and Saddleback Community Church in Orange County, California (Wilson, 2000; Yancey, 2005). For liberal/mainline churches I examined the websites of the six congregations cited by Wellman (2002) as vibrant. 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 chose two websites from that list by counting the total Web pages per site and selecting the two churches with the largest websites, St. Gregory of Nyssa in San Francisco and Seattle First Baptist. For emergent churches, a core group of eight churches was identified from the informational website established by the leaders of the emergent movement.<sup>4</sup> The two emergent churches chosen were Cedar Ridge Community Church in Spencerville, Maryland, and Solomon's Porch in Minneapolis, again using the criterion of the sites with the most web pages. I observed the six sites for approximately 20 hours a week for four months.

### **Megachurch Websites: Sophisticated and Strategic**

The two primary audiences for congregational websites were made explicit in the strategy of Saddleback Community Church, in Orange County, California, one of the largest and best known megachurches. Saddleback had two websites, one for visitors and one for members.<sup>5</sup> The visitor site addressed questions and issues of people looking for a church or planning to visit Saddleback, and its homepage, when compared with its member site homepage, had more white space, fewer links, and fewer graphics, giving it a more serene and peaceful look. A slideshow with four locations for photos showed a total of 18 photos, four

of them nature photos, one of them a photo of part of the church building, and the rest photos of people posed informally, most of them looking into the camera. To the left of the slideshow was a three-sentence statement of welcome, followed by a statement set off from the paragraph: "Remember: You Matter to God." Below the statement of welcome was a list of seven links written in the forms of questions or statements, such as, "What should I expect when I visit?" and "Saddleback cares: How can we help you?" The page also featured worship times and the church's address with a link to a map, as well as links to video of worship services, audio of music, and the congregation's newsletter. In the months I observed the site, the homepage of this site for visitors didn't change at all.

In the upper right of the visitor homepage was a link to Saddleback's member site, and the member site was referenced and linked on several of the pages of the visitor site. The homepage of the member site had a more cluttered look than the visitor site homepage, as if members needed to be aware of more options for involvement and needed to receive more information than new visitors do. The member site was updated frequently with changes in text, announcements of upcoming events, and new graphical links. The second megachurch, Willow Creek, in a suburb of Chicago, combined information for regular attenders with information for newcomers on the same website and was explicit in its information for potential visitors and newcomers. On the homepage, a question mark graphical link was accompanied by the statement "New to Willow? Look here."<sup>6</sup> Some of the other pages on the website had a box labeled "New to Willow Creek?" with six links, four of them in the form of questions.<sup>7</sup> These links for newcomers, spread all over the website, gave newcomers multiple opportunities to get basic information about the congregation.

### **The "Demand" Gaze**

The two megachurches, Saddleback Community Church and Willow Creek Community Church, had complex and sophisticated websites. For example, both Willow Creek's site and

Saddleback's member site had three slideshows that ran continuously using professional quality photos and complex graphics. Both sites had numerous links in the form of graphics and a set of graphical links in a slideshow. Willow Creek advertised on its homepage that it offered video streaming of one of its ministries. Both sites crammed an amazing amount of information onto their homepages, a feat that required careful design by skilled website producers. Both of these megachurch websites had a unified appearance, in contrast with many church websites which seem a bit scattered because of the diverse ministries of the church and because the sites often offer links to denominational or community ministries, each of which had its own graphical style. Both sites offered a high number of links to ministries within the church, with Willow Creek's homepage offering well over 100 links. Because these megachurch websites used so many high quality photos and graphics and demonstrated such a tight and coherent design, they might have conveyed to some audiences a sense of authority and credibility based on quality, increasing their persuasive appeal. Their appeal with other audiences may have been diminished because they might have been perceived as overly slick and somewhat manipulative.

These two megachurch websites also had characteristics that resembled elements of another genre, the family photo album. Saddleback's member site used a slide show that ran continuously at the top of all its website pages. The five photos in the slide show, which looked like they could have been taken in a photographic studio, showed groups of people with labels such as "couples small group" and "singles 40+ small group." A total of 37 adults were pictured, all gazing into the camera, all posed relatively formally, with several ethnicities represented. The Willow Creek site had a slideshow in the upper left corner of the site beside the name of the church. This slideshow also ran continuously on all the pages of the website and showed a total of more than 20 people pictured individually in head shots within a circular frame – men, women, and children of all ages and with some variation in ethnicity. Again, all the individuals were looking right at the camera. The Saddleback site drew on

the genre of a formal family photo album, with studio quality photos, while the Willow Creek site evoked a more informal family photo album. Because the photos recurred on most of the pages of these two websites, the family photo genre influenced the entire site.

The websites of these two megachurches also had components of sophisticated print and TV advertisements, which are designed to persuade the viewer to do or purchase something. The unity and coherence of the sites, coupled with a large quantity of information shoehorned effectively into a small space, spoke of professional graphic designers at work. These two websites offered multiple options for worship attendance and multiple opportunities for engagement: small groups, volunteer opportunities within the congregation, service opportunities in the nearby community, mission trips to help with disaster relief and long-term overseas projects, to name only a few. These options and opportunities were coupled with a high number of imperative verbs, such as “join,” “belong,” “grow,” “serve,” “look here,” “learn about,” “rediscover,” and “sign up.” The many photos of individuals and groups looking into the camera also fit the advertising genre. When a person in a photograph looks straight at the viewer, it is a form of direct address, acknowledging the viewer explicitly. Kress and van Leeuwen (1999) call this kind of image a “demand,” because the participant’s gaze “demands that the viewer enter into some kind of imaginary relationship with him or her” (p. 381). “Demand” is a good word to describe the overall feel of these two megachurch websites, which implicitly and explicitly asked viewers to respond by coming to the church and joining into activities. Miller (1984) advocates a kind of classification by genre based on consideration of social or situated actions rather than syntactic or semantic analysis. The megachurches, with their family photo albums, imperative verbs and announcements that resembled advertisements, were strenuously urging a particular social and situated action: come and engage in our congregational activities.

### **Home and Family; Intimate and Very Large**

The metaphors home and family are used in advertising and political speech to describe many institutions and nations (Sputa, Marchant, Rothlisberg, & Paulson, 1996; Bundang, 2002; Lakoff, 2002); they are also commonly used in Christian circles to describe aspects of congregational life (Frambach, 2003). “Family” is an “ultimate term” (Weaver, 1953) that draws on deeply held, archetypal notions of good and evil. In addition to invoking the genre of the family photo album, Saddleback Community Church used the metaphors of home and family extensively to invite people into the life of the congregation. On the homepage of their visitor site was a list of seven questions and statements, each of them a link. One question – “What does Saddleback have for my family?” – linked to a page with a series of links to age-group ministries in the church, and verbal text which illustrated the use of these two metaphors:

Our family would love to welcome your family to church next weekend. We have opportunities for each member of your household to enjoy themselves as they encounter God through the Bible and other people just like you. . . . The best way to find out all that's here for you and your family is to visit us this weekend. If you'd like more info about Saddleback, check out [www.saddlebackfamily.com](http://www.saddlebackfamily.com), the Web site for those who call Saddleback home. This will give you an “insiders [sic] view” of life at Saddleback.

The congregation was described by the metaphors home and family, which transfer their meanings onto the congregation. In this case, in some places, the meaning of family was also retained in its usual sense as household. The Saddleback visitor website used photos to convey that the kind of families and homes being evoked were happy, healthy, and untroubled. To the right of the paragraph cited above, on the page linked from the homepage, were three photographs: a long narrow photograph of flowers; a larger rectangular photograph of a man, woman and four children, all looking

into the camera, with five of the six people smiling; and an even larger photograph of part of the church building. The verbal metaphors expressed in the three paragraphs were echoed in the photographs; a happy, healthy traditional family, a church building, and cheerful flowers were linked visually. The Saddleback member's website had a page listing eight reasons, each with a paragraph description, why people should join a small group. The second reason was, "You will begin to really feel like part of God's family." The home and family metaphors were used strategically on the Saddleback website, invoking an "insider's view" as well as the "personal and friendly" aspect of homes and families, and transferring those concepts to the congregation.

While the family metaphor was more prominent on the Saddleback site, the Willow Creek website expressed its commitment to intimacy in many ways. Bill Hybels' welcome letter, available on a link from Willow Creek's homepage for newcomers, mentioned that the church was very large, which gave people the option to join into congregational activities as much or as little as they desired. "But if you look closer," Hybels wrote, "you'll find that in many ways we're small. In fact, we're actually a network of small groups." On another page, linked off Willow Creek's homepage, was a description of a new initiative for the congregation called "Neighborhood Life," which in part involved a monthly meal in neighborhoods. The link on the homepage said, "A place to belong, grow and serve." The text, on another page, asked, "Why Neighborhood Life?"

Neighborhood Life responds to a fragmented world — one with declining social ties and lives stretched thin by demanding work hours, long commutes, jam-packed schedules. . . . Neighborhood Life is the optimal place for life change similar to the experiences of the early church where spiritual development and outreach happened right where you live.

Neighborhood Life was one of an array of fellowship groups and small groups that were promoted on Willow Creek's web-

site as a way for people to connect. On one page of the Willow Creek site, three testimonies were given by people who had recently joined the church. Each was only one paragraph long, and in one of them a man named Rus said the church's motorcycle fellowship "is such a wonderful, warm-hearted group that the fellowship I experience with them is like being in a very close family." Another newcomer, a woman, reflected, "I am delighted to be part of such a caring and creative body. The membership process was stimulating and formed friendships and bonds that are ongoing. We have a small group that grew out of the membership class!"

Both the Saddleback and Willow Creek websites did an effective job of inviting people into smaller communities through the announcements of opportunities to get involved and become connected. The effectiveness lay in their words of invitation; the photos they used that conveyed a sense of welcome, family, and home; and in the multiple links to opportunities for involvement. These two megachurches didn't provide an extensive theological or theoretical framework to describe why community matters in the Christian life; their invitations to community seemed to be based on expediency as much as theology. Saddleback's web page advocating joining small groups, mentioned above, said that being in a small group helped a person obey the commands of the Bible. The words from Bill Hybels on the Willow Creek site stressed that small groups were a place to nurture authentic relationships. The megachurch sites seemed to be saying that in this fragmented world, intimate relationships were a good idea and biblically-obedient, and in a big church, intimate settings need to coexist with the larger gatherings. On these two megachurch websites, efforts to promote intimate community were portrayed as expedient and helpful, not necessarily central to what it means to be a Christian.

### **The Future Church?**

Using words, photos, and links, the websites of these two evangelical megachurches created a portrait of their congregations, presenting an argument about who they are and how they are

inviting the website viewer to join in. Saddleback Community Church and Willow Creek Community Church pictured themselves as big, busy families. Everyone could find a place to be productive, everyone could find a few other like-minded family members to talk with on a regular basis, and everyone could feel happy about being a part of this wonderful, lively, and outgoing family. New people were strongly encouraged to join the family, and they were encouraged to believe that their needs will be met in the course of family life. Family members were free to talk in an intimate way to those with whom they are close, particularly with those who have the same needs and concerns that they have, but they didn't have much voice in the overall functioning of the family. The head of the family – the pastor or pastors, the board, and/or the staff – exercised a fairly tight control over the public face of the family, the way the family's values and priorities are presented to outsiders. The family embraced traditional Christian values, and it functioned in a way that was common in some American families in the past who lived by the adage, "children should be seen and not heard." While the family members were not encouraged to be child-like in every way – many were encouraged to take leadership roles in small groups and ministries – family members were encouraged to be seen keeping busy serving and being involved with like-minded people, and they were not encouraged to think "outside the box" or to ask challenging questions. The family would be most effective in its functioning if all the family members kept busy and did their part, embracing the values of the whole family and letting the leaders speak for everyone.

Both Saddleback and Willow Creek may be models for the church of the future. Through their visual and verbal texts and through their evocation of the genre of the family photo album, they strategically made use of home and family metaphors to communicate that they are intimate while being large. This implied intimacy in the face of an increasingly impersonal culture must be attractive to many people and will presumably continue to be so in the years to come. The home and family metaphors also evoked contentment, prosperity, and health—values that



connect strongly with the values of the wider American culture—while also encouraging engagement with the congregation. In addition, these two congregations made wise use of the website medium, offering numerous links to help people get involved and showing they are up-to-date and contemporary through the obviously professional design of the sites. An astonishing array of options for engagement were described visually and verbally – not many congregations offer a motorcycle fellowship – but the diversity of activities and ministries was not coupled with parallel diversity in voices and opinions. The congregations' unitary voices were strong, and one right way to think about many issues of faith was articulated on pages that answered questions or expressed faith positions. However, the strong family, with forceful parental voices, may have a continuing attraction for many people, and these websites use the family metaphor effectively, both verbally and visually, so the lack of diversity of voice may not be noticed by many viewers.

This unitary voice was also communicated through the aspects of the advertising genre that were evoked. The many photos with direct address created a demand, which was reinforced by the use of imperative verbs. These evocations of the advertising genre created a highly proscriptive message. With the rise in options for diverse voices on blogs and other online forums, this unitary voice seems old fashioned and not a harbinger of the future. In addition, the use of strategies common in advertising raises questions about the commercialization of the Christian faith, indicating that faith may have become one more commodity and that “shopping” for a church has become an appropriate way to think about church involvement. The ubiquity of advertisements means that the adoption of advertising strategies on these congregational websites probably appears natural to many viewers. These two congregations use the website medium effectively, and their consistency of message and coherence of argument are compelling. Their strategic approach to Christian ministry is clearly visible through this analysis of their websites.

### **Vibrant Liberal/Mainline Churches: A Gentle, Informed Welcome**

The two vibrant liberal/mainline churches, Seattle First Baptist and St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco,<sup>8</sup> were much smaller than the two megachurches. While the two megachurches were non-denominational and evangelical, both of these liberal congregations were linked to a mainline denomination: the American Baptist Church and the Episcopal Church in America, respectively. However, these mainline congregations had in common with the megachurches a sense of vibrancy and life. Their websites were engaging and interesting, and the congregations were portrayed as having plenty to offer a prospective attendee. Both of these sites exemplified the conventional website genre, with photos, verbal text, and numerous hyperlinks, and both were moderately sophisticated websites for a congregation. However, both sites lacked the highly sophisticated and complex nature of the websites of Saddleback and Willow Creek; for example, they had no slideshows, fewer links to audio or video, and fewer photos and graphics on their homepage and other pages. Both First Baptist and St. Gregory drew on other genres in addition to the website genre.

The St. Gregory of Nyssa website, like the two megachurch sites, looked like a photo album. However, in this case, the album did not picture a nuclear family. This website featured dozens of photos of the church building and of worship services in progress. The photos of the building and worship services served to emphasize the place and the community assembled as a whole, perhaps a very extended family. Almost none of the photos of people involved a demand gaze; instead they showed groups of people dancing, singing, praying, or listening in worship, interacting with each other and presumably with God. The congregational leaders wore brightly colored robes from Africa and Asia, Ethiopian crosses decorated the worship space, and the feel was festive and international. St. Gregory's church building was built in the 1980s and is quite innovative, with two separate spaces for the worship service, one space for the liturgy of the Word and one space for the Sacraments. The

photos on the website made clear that the congregation dances from one room to the other in the middle of the worship service. The tall, octagonal wing used for the Sacraments is painted with 74 historic figures in the style of icons, all of them dancing, and the website featured a clear and large reproduction of each figure with a brief description of who he or she is or was. Unlike many icons, these figures do not look at the viewer; their eyes are all focused slightly to the left of the onlooker. Kress and van Leeuwen (1999) use the term “offer” to describe photos in which the people look away from the camera. St. Gregory’s photos “offer” rather than “demand.”

Its verbal texts also offered welcome rather than demanding action. “How do we live as friends of God? At St. Gregory’s, this is a question we explore together. We make use of ancient traditions and shared experience as we find our way through the modern world as a Christian community.”<sup>9</sup> This language, without direct use of imperative verbs, fits the genre of a bulletin board in a church building. Bulletin boards are often used in congregations to post photos showing the congregation in action. Congregational activities such as picnics, retreats, classes, and children’s events are often photographed and posted on bulletin boards to help both newcomers and congregation members see the kinds of activities they might participate in. These photo bulletin boards often have brief descriptions accompanying the photos, describing the event and implying that the viewer was welcome to join in next time. Accompanying its photos, the St. Gregory’s website gave a verbal description of the typical pattern of worship services; the history of the construction of the church building, completed in 1995, and the philosophy behind various aspects to the building; descriptions of the people pictured in the icons painted on the walls; and descriptions of the various outreach ministries offered by the church. The photos and descriptions on St. Gregory’s website offered the possibility of engagement without urging it strenuously.

The homepage of the website of First Baptist Church, the second liberal/mainline church, had many characteristics of congregational print media that preceded websites, such as

newsletters and brochures: a lot of verbal text, few graphics and photos, a mission statement, a brief history, a sermon excerpt, and a calendar of classes, coupled with few imperative verbs and no photos of people gazing into the camera. Over the course of the months I observed the website, the homepage format stayed the same, but about two thirds of the verbal content changed frequently. Each week a new sermon was posted in the right hand third of the page, with the first few paragraphs (approximately 250-400 words) on the homepage and with a photo of the minister delivering the sermon, always dressed in a black academic robe with a brightly colored stole, not looking into the camera. The photo was a frozen frame of a video of the previous week's sermon, so the text of the sermon was available in both written and video form. In the center column, the calendar items changed regularly as well, and these items included dates and names of various events with descriptions ranging from 25 to 150 words.<sup>10</sup> In the left-hand column, the list of contact information, the mission statement (61 words) and the "About Us" statement (102 words describing the congregation's history and expressing welcome) remained the same over the months I observed the site. This contrasts with the megachurch sites, where only phrases and brief sentences were used on both sites. The longest description on the Willow Creek homepage was 20 words,<sup>11</sup> and that included the title of the event and the dates it was offered. The use of extended verbal descriptions, rather than numerous photos, graphics, or brief invitations, indicated that First Baptist's site drew on the newsletter/brochure genre.

The two liberal/mainline churches established their sense of authority and credibility on their websites not by their embrace of the highest standards of website design, like the megachurches did, but by means that have been traditional in churches for generations. St. Gregory's homepage had a picture of its building at the top right, with the words "Welcome Home" superimposed on the photo. First Baptist used a photo of the minister, again at the top right, always dressed in a robe. The building and the minister have traditionally been sources of identity and values for congregations. On First Baptist's home-

page, the presence of abundant information conveyed authority. On St. Gregory's homepage, information about and a photo of the congregation's award-winning food pantry conveyed further authority. These two churches invited participation by giving information, both visually (St. Gregory's) and verbally (both sites). These two mainline/liberal churches communicated an offer of educated choice to participate based on abundant visual and verbal information, rather than the direct demand of the megachurch websites with their imperative verbs and countless photos of people looking into the camera.

### **Explicit Inclusion and Embrace of Diversity**

The concept of community promoted by First Baptist Church and St. Gregory of Nyssa was centered in their commitment to inclusiveness and diversity. First Baptist's mission statement began with the words, "We are a community of faith," and the congregation identified itself as a "community of faith" in other places on the website. The mission statement also emphasized inclusion. The 13 distinctives of the congregation included "We are a welcoming and affirming congregation; sexual and gender minority persons are naturally integrated into the congregation in a relaxed way," and "We value congregational fellowship where friendships and mutual support are evidenced among our members." The eight values of the congregation included: "We value the diversity of opinion, ethnic diversity and diversity of lifestyle in this congregation."

The First Baptist coordinating pastor, on a page titled "The Learning Community," continued this theme linking community to diversity and inclusion:

Churches are not neutral. They espouse values. They have a message. They have an agenda. They have vision of how things could be. There are, at least, two responses to this reality. One is the way of indoctrination. Indoctrination has to do with imparting knowledge from one generation to another, or from a source of authority to newcomers. Indoctrination

requires agreement as to a message, a vision, an agenda, a set of values. Because Seattle First Baptist is a place of varied messages, visions, agendas and values, indoctrination doesn't fit our needs.

The other way is by becoming a Learning Community . . . where questions, searching, and openness are evident throughout our communal life. . . . We are not a complacent church. Nor is this an entirely comfortable place. It is a place for seekers. It is a place where activists can find spiritual anchor and spiritual seekers can find their calling in the world. It is a place where Great Ideas that come from a variety of sources are confronted. It is not a place of conformity or uniformity. [Underline in original.]

This vision of community included the discomfort that came from a true welcome of questions and a willingness to listen carefully to viewpoints that were not one's own.

In the same way, St. Gregory's also emphasized inclusion as a part of community. A link on the homepage labeled, "Click here if you're new," led to a nine-paragraph letter from a congregation member, who noted below her signature that she also happened to be the webmaster. In a warm conversational tone, she acknowledged that visitors likely had many questions. She talked about the priorities of the congregation, described the ministers, and invited viewers to call the church office if they had more questions. Her letter to newcomers almost equated inclusion with community:

We're interested in being inclusive, in active questioning and discussion in a respectful setting. . . . Did we mention that we value inclusiveness? We value community, and we constantly work to nurture it. At the same time we strive to not become closed, tribal, or form cliques. We welcome people from all backgrounds, and in case you were wondering, that includes people from all sexual orientations. We really view ourselves as a spiritual community.

The fact that the letter for newcomers was written by a member, rather than a pastor, was an affirmation of diversity, as was another aspect of community expressed in the letter: "We really value getting together in person, and hearing and honoring each other's stories. We'd love to hear yours. So I do hope you'll come try out a few services with us."

### **The Future Church?**

These two vibrant/liberal mainline congregations used their websites to paint a portrait of themselves, making an argument about who they are and the kind of invitation they extend to the website viewer. Seattle First Baptist Church and St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church portrayed themselves as nurturing parents. Lakoff (2002) argues that conservatism, whether religious or secular, is based on the strict father model,<sup>12</sup> while liberalism is centered around a nurturant parent model. Nurturant parent morality, according to Lakoff, requires empathy for others and helping those who need help. In order to help others, one needs to take care of oneself, nurture social ties, and have empathy for oneself in order to have empathy for others. Morality is empathy, and moral action is nurturance of social ties and self-development. The portrait of vibrant liberal/mainline congregations on their websites closely fits this description, with the addition of one aspect. These two vibrant liberal/mainline congregations found at least some of their strength to be nurturing parents through their continued embrace of traditional ties to their buildings, denominations, and communities, as well as their continued use of traditional styles of ministry, ranging from their traditional music choices to their emphasis on print media.

Nurturing parents energetically encourage their children; in the same way these vibrant liberal/mainline congregations provided a voice that encourages and embraces people on the margins. While the two megachurches as big, busy families wanted their members to be active in ministry, these vibrant liberal mainline congregations as nurturing parents wanted their members to have empathy for people in need. These vibrant liberal/mainline churches lacked the structures, ranging

from links on their websites to small groups to join, that the megachurches used to encourage involvement. Therefore, they talked about empathy but didn't present opportunities to make it concrete. The vibrant liberal/mainline churches did encourage engagement with the congregation as a whole, but in a less structured way than the megachurches, with the goal of helping members to embrace this ethic of empathy.

With increasing globalism and the increasing diversity of the American culture, these two churches may represent directions for the church of the future. The seminars at First Baptist on world religions, and the visual elements from other regions of the world at St. Gregory's, provided avenues for congregation members to engage with the wider culture. Their welcome of diverse voices parallels the rise in blogs, reality television, and other forums that encourage people to tell their own stories. This broadness of inclusion as an essential part of community in these two churches gave a different focus than was found in the two megachurch websites. This inclusiveness was a key aspect of the identity of these vibrant liberal/mainline congregations, and positions them to be the church of the future in a multicultural society that encourages people to speak their truth in various ways. Few direct invitations were present on these sites. Most of the encouragement to become engaged with the congregation or to participate more fully came through the giving of verbal and visual information. A gentle and informed welcome was extended with little of the urgency of the invitations on the megachurch websites.

These two congregations placed a high value on many of the traditional values of the Christian faith, like the two megachurches did. However, the form was different. These two liberal/mainline congregations used photos of the church building and the minister in a robe to draw on traditional sources of authority for churches. These congregations drew on models that pre-date websites, with a gentle invitation of welcome. In the case of St. Gregory's, a church photo album or bulletin board showed a place for innovative worship, and the photos might help the viewer feel inclined to join, and, in the case of



First Baptist, a great deal of newsletter or brochure-like verbal information might give the viewer information about how to fit in to the congregation's activities. The gentle welcome seems appropriate in a multicultural world; however the use of older styles of communication may make these congregations seem out of date.

### **Emergent Churches: a Trendy Coffee House**

The two emergent churches analyzed, like the megachurches, were not affiliated with a denomination. Solomon's Porch in Minneapolis and Cedar Ridge Community Church outside Baltimore<sup>13</sup> appeared from their websites to be similar in size to Seattle First Baptist and St. Gregory of Nyssa. Emergent churches are generally viewed as evangelical, like the megachurches. Notably, though, the websites of Solomon's Porch and Cedar Ridge had a different feel from both the two megachurches and the two mainline churches, drawing on neither the family photo album genre nor the printed newsletter genre. The two graphical elements on the homepage of Solomon's Porch<sup>14</sup> were dreamy artistic montages of photos and graphics. The photographic elements included a tree, a part of a building, and a person's shadow on a cracked sidewalk. Cedar Ridge Community Church<sup>15</sup> had six photos of individuals on its homepage, and all the photos were slightly out of focus, eliminating any comparison to slick advertising. Further, the photos differed in style, gaze and color, conveying an artistic approach, and each of the six photos functioned as a link to a personal story by that individual, ranging in length from 6 to 20 paragraphs, describing their faith journey. Cedar Ridge's website also had a photo of the roofline of the barn where the congregation met, a photo of an outdoor scene, and a wide band of wallpaper that looked like textured paper with bits of mostly indecipherable writing on it. The visual components on these sites were reminiscent of a gallery display of contemporary art. These two sites used only a few imperative verbs and offered more opportunities for virtual community than the other two kinds of churches. Over the five months I observed the site, Solomon's Porch offered a

member login, a place to submit prayer requests by email, and a link on the homepage to sign up for an email newsletter, while Cedar Ridge offered a sitemap and a link labeled, "Join a Virtual Community! Click here to join the Talking Points, Announce, Prayer, Classifieds, or E-Post list." At one point during those months, Cedar Ridge also offered a link for people to submit their thoughts about the vision of the church.

The arts and the environment were prominent on these sites. Solomon's Porch offered a link from its homepage to a virtual art gallery with the work of numerous visual artists. In addition, an arts group meeting was described, as were places in their church building where art was displayed, an artists' co-op, and art opportunities connected with the church year. Cedar Ridge met in a converted farmhouse on a piece of farmland, and the website described the ways the congregation was trying to preserve the land in an environmentally friendly fashion. The genre most parallel to these websites was a trendy, eco-friendly coffee bar offering a contemporary art display and wireless internet connection.<sup>16</sup> The ability of these websites to persuade viewers in their twenties and thirties was linked to their ability to enter into their daily worlds, which for many included working, talking, reading email, surfing the web, and just hanging out at coffee shops. Kenneth Burke argues for a connection between identification and persuasion: "You persuade a man [sic] only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude [and] idea, identifying your ways with his" (Burke, 1950, p. 55). The family photos in the megachurch websites accomplished this sense of identification, as did some of the photos on the liberal/mainline sites that showed people engaged in various activities. The two emergent church websites used identification even more cleverly to establish connection with their audience. Their artsy photographic montages, environmental emphasis, and opportunities for virtual community – which combined to give the feel of a contemporary coffee house – spoke the language of Generations X and Y, as did the links to Mapquest for directions on the Solomon's Porch site and the virtual community links on the Cedar Ridge site. The

emergent churches were inviting people to come to an artsy coffee house, with opportunities for connection if desired. The emergent churches invoked an audience in their twenties or thirties with the option to join in the congregation's community but with permission not to join in as well. This approach was miles apart from the megachurches.

### **Authentic and Missional Community**

In the past few decades most churches have devoted time and energy to creating places where people can connect with each other in the midst of a culture characterized by fragmentation, isolation, and broken families. As shown earlier, the megachurches and mainline churches in this study strongly emphasized connections between people. In this analysis of six congregations, the two emergent churches used the word "community" the most frequently. Solomon's Porch, in the three paragraphs on its homepage, used the word four times. On a page with the header "About Us," four characteristics of Solomon's Porch were listed (holistic, missional, Christian, and community) with a brief explanation of each.<sup>17</sup> The concepts of community and connection recurred frequently. On the webpage labeled "Our Dreams," one of 23 statements was: "Christian Community is the attraction to outsiders and the answer to questions of faith." The word "connected" also appeared several times on the website in phrases like "opportunities to be connected with one another."

Many of these same emphases appeared on the Cedar Ridge website when community was discussed, as was evident in the mission statement: "Cedar Ridge Community Church exists to help people have life to the full. We welcome people into a dynamic Christian community where they can connect — with God, with one another and with opportunities to make a difference in our changing world." At Cedar Ridge, community was viewed as the space that provided opportunity to connect in three directions: with God, with other people, and with places for service. Again, community was largely seen as an end in itself, not as a means to an end. Cedar Ridge's 2005 strategic plan had four components

(connection, disciple-making, leadership and impact). In addition to an emphasis on community in the component entitled “connection,” the component “disciple-making” emphasized that being and making disciples takes place in “authentic community.”

Cedar Ridge’s statement of values contained six pairs of words, each described with a paragraph. Five of the six paragraphs contained a reference to community or relationships as a small or major component of the values expressed. Under “Authenticity/Integrity” was an encouragement for people “to be authentic with God and one another. This value means we don’t hide our rough edges and struggles.” Under “Balance/Wisdom” was a description of wisdom as a guide “toward integrated, holistic, systems thinking, encouraging synergy instead of competition within our community.” Under “Spiritual Vibrancy/Mystery” was an encouragement of fellowship as a spiritual discipline. Under “Acceptance/Diversity” was the expression of the desire to be “a safe and accepting place for people, whatever their background. . . . We reach out to a wide variety of people and encourage them to explore their questions and progress in their spiritual journey at their own pace. We welcome them with their unique blends of experiences, gifts, challenges, and insights, believing that we will be enriched as a community by the contributions of each individual.”

Further, one of the six values was labeled “Connection/Community.” Many of the same themes from the Solomon’s Porch website appeared in the paragraph describing this value:

For us, church is not just a disconnected crowd of people who attend public programs together. Our ideal is a dynamic balance that we call “mission through community” . . . [H]ow can people experience the rich life God intends for them unless they are connected with others: serving and being served, challenging and being challenged, giving and receiving forgiveness, teaching and being taught, giving and receiving, failing and being encouraged and offering encouragement to fellow strugglers?

Cedar Ridge stresses that community requires “time, effort and vulnerability.” Serving, being challenged, forgiving, teaching, giving, receiving, encouraging, laughing, crying, working, communicating, experimenting, and resting together are laid out as aspects of the kind of community that was encouraged and equated with living “life to the full.” On these two emergent church websites, the concept of community was not abstract or expedient. Community was defined and described with specific verbs and attributes, and the encouragement to engage in community was grounded in extensive discussions of Christian theology. For these churches, engagement in community was closely related to their identities, and their offer of community – which the website viewer or worship attender was free to engage in or not – was paramount in what they encouraged people to consider doing.

### **The Future Church?**

Solomon’s Porch and Cedar Ridge Community Church, using photos, graphics, and words, made an argument on their websites about who they are and the ways they expect others to join in. These two emergent churches presented themselves as trendy, artsy, eco-friendly coffee houses, with options for face-to-face and online community if desired. They alone affirmed a style of community that did not draw on family imagery or models. They affirmed community and connection that are highly self-revelatory and honest; authenticity and the absence of masks are valued. The reason for engagement in community did not come from expediency; instead it was rooted in theological understanding. The emergent churches, in part because of their affirmation of authenticity, provided multiple opportunities for the voices of their members to be heard. Individual self-expression was valued. Just like the megachurches and the vibrant liberal/mainline churches, they valued certain aspects of tradition that harmonized with their priorities. The emergent churches valued early Christian tradition that teaches the significance of community and that stresses spiritual disciplines that can be exercised alone or with others. Their competence with

electronic media gave them a contemporary flavor, which was balanced in an interesting way by their love of ancient history and their embrace of evangelical theology. They spoke deeply about the theological issues that undergirded their values. Just like a person in a coffee shop might get into a long philosophical discussion about current events, emergent church websites engaged the viewer in deep theological conversations about the ministry of the congregation.

The two emergent church websites did not make direct invitations for new people to visit; their invitation was inherent in their evocation of trendy coffee shop as genre. They seemed to want new people to feel comfortable if they came, just like they would be in a coffee shop, with no pressure to connect but with the option for community – both in online and face-to-face – always present. Yet at the same time the websites expressed theological urgency about community; they made clear that their central purpose as a congregation and their ability to do mission in the world were intricately connected to the kind of community they developed, and they desired that their communities be authentic, honest, and missional. These two congregations illustrated their welcome of the diverse voices of their congregation members by posting members' stories and artwork on their websites, and by making blogs and other forms of online interaction available. While they practiced community on their websites, in addition to talking about it, they lacked the large number of links to specific ways to get involved that were present on the megachurch sites. Their evocation of the coffee house genre positions them to be churches for the future, places where people can gather informally in ways that are comfortable for the younger generations: opportunities for engagement are present but not forced, people are welcomed by the ambiance but not coerced, and contemporary patterns of everyday life are affirmed.

### **Conclusion**

Churches use their websites to persuade visitors to attend and to encourage current members to keep attending and to be involved. These three kinds of congregations, represented on

the six websites studied here, do that by evoking societal patterns—the big, busy family; the nurturant parent; and the trendy coffee house—that are attractive to sub-groups of Americans. These congregations seem to accept the values of the groups of Americans they attract, and they seem uncritical of the societal patterns they reify in their communication on their websites. All of them use the website medium strategically, with links, and verbal and visual texts that construct arguments about who they are and what they expect of the people who attend their church. In a way that is similar to effective advertisements, many of the strategic components on these websites probably seem natural to the viewer. One of the values of this kind of study lies in revealing the arguments that are being made and that look so natural.

These websites reveal characteristics of the churches that carry warnings for their future. The many imperative verbs and photos with direct address on the megachurch websites create a demand for action and response that leaves little room for questions, doubt, and diverse faith experiences. The evocation of the intimacy of family through words and photos, in an online environment with no opportunity for dialogue on the website itself and with the encouragement to visit a church with thousands of members, seems slick, deceptive, and increasingly irrelevant in an age of blogs and reality television. The vibrant liberal/mainline websites draw heavily on genres that predate websites, which makes the viewer wonder if the churches will be flexible enough to relate to the changing culture. In addition, the words of inclusive welcome alone, without corresponding website structures to enable people to become involved, seem disingenuous. The emergent church websites imply a place where people can hang out, be themselves, and do whatever they want. Their words emphasize the specifics of their Christian commitment, but the evocation of the coffee house genre makes the viewer wonder if these congregations truly are any different than a coffee house or other gathering place in the wider culture where just about anything goes. In addition, the relative paucity of links to ways to get involved raises the question of whether

their talk about Christian community is simply words without corresponding action.

In each case, the website medium gives opportunities for organizational self-expression. The words, photos, graphics, links, and overall layout construct identity and make arguments. These arguments and constructions of identity can be analyzed using the same research tools that have been honed through decades of analysis of other forms of communication. Rhetorical analysis can be used to evaluate the persuasive appeal of the words used on websites in much the same ways that verbal texts have been subjected to rhetorical analysis for centuries. In the same way, the photos and graphics can be analyzed individually using principles of visual rhetoric. However, effective analysis of a website will not stop with a consideration of the components in isolation. The visual rhetoric of the overall look of the website and the ways the words and images interact dialogically to construct arguments must also be evaluated.

In addition, the unique characteristics of websites must be kept in mind, particularly the significance of links and the patchworked nature of website material. Links to other pages within the website and links to other websites express values and organizational identity. The persuasive appeal of the words and images used in connection with the links is significant, particularly on the home page, as is the pattern of the kinds of links used as well as the metaphorical and metonymic aspects of the links. The various website components work together to evoke genres that may or may not have been intended by the creators of the website. An exploration of the genres evoked, as was modeled here, is particularly valuable because websites patchwork together numerous forms of everyday communication in creative ways and because the genres in themselves make subtle but powerful arguments about the organization represented by the website. All of these considerations illustrate some of the new challenges and opportunities presented by online discourse. Websites are here to stay, at least for the foreseeable future. A 28-year-old in my extended family calls websites the “new front page” for organizations, and notes that almost no one in his



generation would visit any institution without first checking out its website. This creates a sense of urgency for congregations and other organizations to evaluate the way they present themselves on their websites, and a corresponding urgency for communication scholars to engage in thorough study of this increasingly significant communication form.

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### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Data regarding the percentage of churches, synagogues and other places of worship that have websites is hard to find. Having engaged in the academic study of congregational websites for the last four years, I would estimate that more than 75% of Christian congregations in the United States have websites, but I have found no research to substantiate that estimate.

<sup>2</sup> According to research conducted October to December 2007 by the Pew Internet and American Life project, 92% of Americans between 18 and 29 use the Internet. Percentages are lower in the older generations. Downloaded May 3, 2008 from [http://www.pewinternet.org/trends/User\\_Demo\\_2.15.08.htm](http://www.pewinternet.org/trends/User_Demo_2.15.08.htm).

<sup>3</sup> Human factors science and engineering refers to a field of study focused on the cognitive properties of individuals or the social behaviors of groups. It overlaps with ergonomics. Human factors practitioners are usually psychologists or physiologists, although they can come from a variety of backgrounds. Human factors engineers who study websites would be most likely to be interested in how people use links and navigate through sites, particularly the cognitive processes involved in making those decisions, not how organizations present their identities.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.org>, downloaded October 20, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> A Google search conducted October 26, 2006 for the church's name resulted in the visitor site first on the list and the member site a few items down the list: [www.saddleback.com](http://www.saddleback.com) (Saddleback's visitor site) and [www.saddlebackfamily.com](http://www.saddlebackfamily.com) (Saddleback's member site).

<sup>6</sup> All quotations and observations in this paragraph were downloaded/observed on October 26, 2006 from [www.willowcreek.org](http://www.willowcreek.org). All additional quotations from the Willow Creek and Saddleback websites were downloaded October 31, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Willow Creek's link for newcomers on the homepage was typical of many megachurches but the presence of links for newcomers on other pages of the website was unusual and may be one of the many factors that contributed to Willow Creek's phenomenal growth.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.seattlefirstbaptist.org> and <http://www.saintgregorys.org>.

<sup>9</sup> Downloaded October 24, 2006. All additional quotations from the websites of Seattle First Baptist and St. Gregory of Nyssa were downloaded on October 28, 2006 unless otherwise noted.

<sup>10</sup> On November 10, 2006.

<sup>11</sup> On October 24, 2006.

<sup>12</sup> As portrayed by their websites, megachurch leadership does function like a strict father in a few ways, but not in every way. Therefore I am not setting up a contrast between megachurches and vibrant liberal/mainline churches based on Lakoff's categories.

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.solomonsporch.com> and <http://www.crc.org>.

<sup>14</sup> On October 19, 2006.

<sup>15</sup> On October 19, 2006.

<sup>16</sup> Two weeks after I came to this conclusion about the coffee house genre of the emergent church websites, *Leadership Journal* (a journal for evangelical pastors) had two articles comparing church ministry to coffee houses. Both articles were written by pastors, one in Illinois and one in Washington state. One pastor works part time as a barrista, and he described what he learned about Christian ministry through his role of preparing and serving coffee drinks (Swanson, 2006). The second article focused on the ways that coffee houses resemble aspects of healthy congregational life: they create places where people are known, where diverse tastes are affirmed, and where community can gather (Asimakoupoulos, 2006). While the articles did not indicate whether or not these two pastors serve emergent churches, the comparison of a church to a coffee house parallels what I observed on the emergent church websites.

<sup>17</sup> All quotations from Solomon's Porch and Cedar Ridge Community Church in this section on authentic and missional community were downloaded on November 2, 2006.

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