

Chapter Seven

The Websites and the Congregations

I began this dissertation with a set of questions in mind that stand behind the specific research undertaken in this study. I am a minister in a mainline denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA), and I have served in pastoral roles in both evangelical and liberal congregations within that denomination. At times I feel at home in both settings, and at other times I feel uncomfortable in both settings. I can see clearly some of the strengths and weaknesses of both approaches to the Christian faith. I can also see the inherent flaws in describing Christianity in terms of a liberal-conservative binary, a perspective which is highlighted so frequently by the media and examined so often in quantitative research on religion. I know I don't fit easily into one of the two categories, and I saw the same phenomenon in the churches where I served (see Bass, 2004, 2005, and 2006, who also describes the limits of this binary). In the liberal congregation, I was surprised to find individuals who were enthusiastic about conservative Christian talk radio. In the evangelical congregation, numerous individuals were as socially progressive as is possible. I wondered if my research might suggest a complexity to the American Christian landscape, and it did. I also wondered why evangelical megachurches are so popular with such large numbers of people, in what ways emergent churches are speaking to the younger generations, and what characteristics of some liberal churches keep them from declining in membership. I wondered what future directions for American Protestant Christianity might be revealed by the patterns of ministry at these three kinds of churches. The joy of this study for me was the opportunity to explore those issues.

Other questions that influenced this dissertation arose from my experience overseeing congregational communications from 1997 to 2004 as a part of my role as associate pastor in a thriving Presbyterian congregation. I had done desktop publishing professionally in the early and mid-1990s, so in my new role as associate pastor I dove into the production of brochures and newsletters, paying careful attention to the words

and look of each publication. In 1998 and 1999, some members of the congregation began talking about having a congregational website. I was not particularly interested at first, but, wanting to encourage lay leadership, I gave them token support. They obtained a URL, and a volunteer designed a site. For the first year or two, I seldom looked at the site. Another volunteer redesigned the site in the early 2000s, and began asking for advice from me more frequently. By the time I left that church in 2004, I was beginning to gain some enthusiasm for the positive online opportunities for congregations. When I began to plan this dissertation, it quickly became clear that congregational communication with both newcomers and members was moving off paper and onto the web, and that websites were becoming a principal medium for expressing organizational identity. Congregational identity was my first interest, and I decided to study persuasion as well because so many aspects of identity are revealed through the ways persuasion is exercised. When I began this study I had no idea of the variety of things that churches were doing on their websites. I didn't know they were using websites to sign people up for activities, to enable online donations, to sell religious books and CDs, to connect viewers to so many denominations and community organizations, to advertise blood drives and motorcycle fellowships and a host of other unexpected activities. A second joy of this study has been to immerse myself in the issues related to the website medium, and begin to see more of the possibilities for congregations as they use websites. In this concluding chapter, I begin my summary of this study by discussing the value of a communication perspective on these matters. I then turn to a focus on the website medium and I summarize my findings in that area. Then I consider the congregations themselves and what can be said about them from this study of their websites.

Communication and the Website Medium

In the words of renown communication scholar James Carey, "To study communication is to examine the actual social process wherein significant symbolic forms are created, apprehended, and used" (1988, p. 30). Carey is one of many

communication scholars who discuss the limitations of the traditional sender-receiver model of communication and who observe the movement within communication studies toward an understanding of the significance of the social, cultural, and constitutive aspects of texts (Hall, 2001; Craig, 2001). This study of websites created by Christian congregations draws on these aspects of contemporary communication studies, affirming the cultural processes that lie behind the symbolic representation of the congregations on the websites, as well as the social realities that may be nurtured within the congregation by the sites. This study has also raised questions about the constitutive nature of congregational websites: Do the sites create aspects of congregational identity as well as reflect them? And do pastors, congregational leaders, and website producers take that possibility into account as they create the sites? The language of ritual, used by Carey to describe the communication process, emphasizes the “maintenance of society in time . . .; not the act of imparting information or influence but the creation, representation, and celebration of shared even if illusory beliefs” (p. 43). This study showed many ways the shared beliefs within congregations are created, represented, and celebrated on websites through the strategic use of visual and verbal resources.

Traditional communication studies have focused on various “levels” of communication: interpersonal, small group, organizational, and mass media (Craig, 2001, p. 133). Congregational websites are compelling objects of study because all of these levels are invoked at different times, as follows: The activities of the congregations, promoted through announcements, photos, graphics, and links, are often designed to encourage interpersonal or small group communication, and this study has examined some of the language and photos that promote such relationships. The congregational websites represent organizations, so they engage significantly with communication studies on that level. All websites have a mass media component to them, because they are accessible to large groups of people. As websites have become more popular in recent years, and as communication scholars have begun to study them, a variety of research methods have been adapted in order to address some of the

complexity of the issues raised by websites. Schneider and Foot (2004) note three primary kinds of analysis used to study websites: discursive or rhetorical analyses, which focus primarily on content; structure or feature analyses, which focus on the structure of the sites, including the links; and sociocultural analyses, which emphasize hyperlink relationality and create new strategies for media ethnography in “virtual space.” This study has drawn primarily on the first two of these methods, focusing largely on the sites as texts with an additional emphasis on the links, which highlight the ways the structure of the sites reveal congregational identity and allow the congregations to exercise persuasion. However, the interviews with website producers are related in part to Schneider and Foot’s third kind of analysis because the interviews situate the sites in specific communities with their unique social practices, providing sociocultural insights related to the production of the websites.

Schneider and Foot (2004) also note that the web is a unique mixture of the permanent and the ephemeral. Websites have permanent aspects to them; the content must exist in a permanent form in order to be posted on a website, and website viewers can archive text from a site through a variety of means. Yet websites are also ephemeral in two ways. First, website content is transitory and can be changed frequently. In addition, websites in many ways resemble television, radio, theater, and particularly films (Manovich, 2002), media that are ephemeral in construction because they are more like performances than documents. Thus, Goffman’s (1959) view of communication as performative provides yet another insight from communication studies that undergirds this analysis. Congregational websites in themselves are performative, a carefully choreographed assemblage of words, photos, graphics, and links. Some of the components of congregational websites are performative in themselves as well. The photos of worship services and other congregational activities, as well as the videos posted on sites, work effectively as performances or rituals because the viewers of the photos can read themselves into the activities pictured.

This study makes a contribution to the field of communication studies in several ways. Studies of organizational websites are still few in number, so this

research will stand as one of the early studies in this area. The methods used in this study – content analysis, rhetorical analysis, and critical analysis drawing on social semiotics – have been adapted from their traditional settings for the purpose of examining websites, something that has not been done frequently. The findings of the study – including the use of imperative verbs and photos with direct address, the invocation of the metaphor of family and the coffee house milieu, the relative autonomy of the website producers, and their embrace of the advertising medium – will be of interest to scholars who study congregations as well as those who study web communication. This research is grounded in many of the newer theories and methods in the field of communication studies, illustrating their use in an effective manner and reporting findings that have significance both in religious studies and communication studies. In short, this research has sought to be interdisciplinary in the best sense of the traditions of communication scholarship.

A Return to the Concepts that Undergird This Study

The conceptual framework for this study focused on three main areas: organizational identity and community, the rhetoric of the web, and social semiotics. In this section I summarize the findings of this study in those three areas, focusing particularly on the connections between the conceptual framework for the study and the website medium, while acknowledging the overlap between these three areas of conceptual focus. In the area of organizational identity, the content analysis looked for key words on homepages, in material for newcomers, in mission statements, and in frequently asked questions, as well as the kinds and numbers of photos, graphics, and links on the homepage. Under the umbrella topic of the rhetoric of the web, persuasion in many forms was examined both through content analysis and rhetorical analysis: links, metaphors, photos, imperative verbs, photos of people in “demand” versus “offer” mode. These analyses contributed to an understanding of the identity of the three kinds of congregations. The rhetorical concept heteroglossia, from the work of Bakhtin, contributed additional insights about the congregations’ identities. The issues of social semiotics were explored most directly through the interviews with the website

producers which place the websites in their context and give insights about why and how the websites were created. However, issues related to social semiotics are also apparent in the content analysis and rhetorical analysis chapters, because those chapters so thoroughly document and describe the semiotic resources used on the sites. I begin by focusing on organizational identity as represented by website characteristics.

Organizational Identity, Community, and Website Characteristics

In chapter two I stated my intention to use a definition of organizational identity proposed by Leuthesser and Kohli (1997): “the way in which an organization reveals its philosophy and strategy through communication, behavior and symbolism” (p. 59). Earlier definitions of organizational identity emphasized an organization’s values based in its history and the aspects of an organization’s character which are central, enduring, and distinctive, and the phrase in the Leuthesser and Kohli definition, “philosophy and strategy,” provides a good summary of those broad concepts. The phrase “communication, behavior and symbolism” emphasizes that an organization’s identity is not simply self-evident, but that it is communicated in its actions and its use of symbols, some of which may be intentional and some of which may be unintentional. As we have entered an information age, it has become apparent that an organization’s communication, behavior and symbolism contribute to the shaping of an organization’s identity in addition to reflecting it. The congregations in this study presented their identities on their websites in part through their use of mission statements. The majority of the congregations had a mission statement of some sort on their website, with 90% of the vibrant liberal/mainline churches posting mission statements in some form on their homepage, while only 65% of emergent churches and 40% of megachurches did so. Some statements reflecting congregation mission were very brief, only a few words long, while others were several sentences. In some cases, a congregation used numerous statements of purpose or vision that could be viewed as mission statements, placed on various web pages. In other cases, particularly in the vibrant liberal/mainline churches, the mission statement was clearly labeled and was

the only statement anywhere on the website that explicitly communicated vision or purpose.

The high percentage of vibrant liberal/mainline churches that presented mission statements on their homepage is indicative of the connection commonly found on vibrant liberal/mainline websites to verbal print media. This connection was highlighted several times in this study. Megachurches and emergent churches that did not have mission statements on their homepage were communicating their congregational identity through other means than explicit verbal statements. The megachurches included many more photos of people than the other two types of churches, and they presented more headshots. This high number of photos of people corresponds with the assessment I have made that they portray themselves on their websites as busy, active families. The megachurches also used more nature photos than the other kinds of churches, expressing some aspect of their identity as connected to nature in a way that is not entirely clear. Perhaps they were trying to communicate peace and serenity or their connection to God as creator. The megachurches also communicated their identity through their links. They had more links explicitly for newcomers and more links to FAQs, small groups, classes and seminars, and opportunities for service than the other two types of churches. These links communicated significant aspects of their identity: they are congregations that attempt to welcome and enfold newcomers, they value small group relationships, and they want to help people engage in learning and service opportunities. The megachurch sites contained half again as many imperative verbs on their homepages as emergent churches, and more than double the number found on vibrant liberal/mainline homepages. These imperative verbs convey another aspect of the identity presented by the megachurches. They are directive; they want people to become engaged in various aspects of congregational life, and they use verbal imperatives to encourage people to join in. The megachurches also had the most links on their homepage to a statement of faith, indicating their identity as being more closely connected to a specific belief system than the other two types of churches. They used slideshows and

audio/video/podcast most often on their websites, confirming their identity as large organizations with commensurately large budgets which can offer the latest technologies. Finally, the ratio of internal links to outlinks was much higher for megachurches than the other two types of churches. All of these modes of communication present megachurches as self-sufficient communities of faith.

In contrast, the vibrant liberal/mainline church websites, through their links and graphics, conveyed their congregations' identities as connected to their denominations and local communities. They presented denominational graphics and photos of their church buildings the most often. They were the least likely to have imperative verbs, to have links for newcomers and links to small groups, and to have a link on their homepage to a statement of faith. They were most likely to use "inclusive," a word that was often used in the mission statements commonly present on their homepages. These characteristics indicate the nature of the inclusive welcome offered by the vibrant liberal/mainline congregations on their websites. They don't want to force people to do or believe specific things; their welcome is more nondirective than that of the megachurches. They were second after the megachurches to have links to educational opportunities, and many of the classes and seminars offered in vibrant liberal/mainline churches explored the Christian faith while drawing on other religious traditions. In addition, the vibrant liberal/mainline congregations had a significant connection to the arts. They had more links to music than the other two kinds of congregations, and they had more links to the arts than the megachurches. While the emergent churches talked about the arts most frequently in their mission statements, the vibrant liberal/mainline congregations also frequently expressed a concern for the arts. Often their connection to their local community came in the form of support for arts groups. The vibrant liberal mainline sites also discussed justice the most often. All of these characteristics convey the identity of these congregations, as presented on their websites, as inclusive, nondirective, with the arts and justice as priorities.

The emergent church sites discussed connections and relationships the most. Their websites contained the words "seeker" and "authentic" the most, and were the

most likely to express their openness to questions. They were second after the megachurches in links to small groups, and they were most likely to link to various forms of online community, such as blogs, polls, and online forums. These characteristics indicate the close connection between the identity of these congregations and their commitment to authentic community that welcomes seekers and encourages people to live with questions. This kind of community was connected to the latest communication technology in a way that was not found in the other kinds of churches. Emergent church websites referenced historic Christianity the most often, expressing their commitment to an identity rooted in Christian history. They had the most links to the arts, and they talked about the arts much more frequently in connection with their mission than the other two types of churches; in fact, they grounded their commitment to the arts in theological principles in a way that almost never occurred on the other two types of church websites. The emergent churches were second after the vibrant liberal/mainline churches in their use of the word “justice,” and they were most likely to mention service to the poor. The organizational identity of emergent churches as portrayed by their websites is distinctly different than the other two types of churches, with less central control and more emphasis on justice than the megachurches, more pathways to engagement than the vibrant liberal/mainline churches, and more emphasis on community than both of the other two kinds of churches.

These churches revealed and constructed their identities through their mission statements, announcements of events, and encouragements to engage with the congregation. The way they used words on their websites was similar to their use of words in other church publications, with the insight from several of the website producers that verbal texts from other publications are often tightened up for use on the web. Photographs can be used on websites in large numbers in a way that is not possible in print media, and photographs communicate significant components of an organization’s identity. Other aspects of identity portrayal on websites are unique to the website medium. Audio, video and podcast brings the spoken word directly to the

website viewer in a way that has similarities with radio and TV yet differs in that a website viewer can choose the time and place to listen or watch, and also can choose the sequence of listening and watching. The congregation's identity as presented in sermons and other presentations can be accessed directly by the website viewer. The choice of links and their positioning on the web page communicate significant things about the values of a congregation in a way that has faint parallels in tables of contents or lists of resources in print media. However the significance of links as a new way to communicate aspects of organizational identity is important to recognize. The presence of opportunities for viewers to express their opinion in online polls and discussion forums also suggests something about a congregation's identity as a place where diverse voices are welcome. The ability to register for events, give money online, and purchase books, CDs and other things was not a focus of this study, but it must be noted that these options also communicate aspects of organizational identity by bringing to the forefront the actions that website producers and congregational leaders want to encourage from viewers. All of these website characteristics contribute to the communication of an organization's identity and merit considerable attention as congregations and online communications continue to evolve.

The Rhetoric of the Web

The second area of theoretic focus of this study is rhetoric, which considers issues of persuasion, and scholars who study the rhetoric of the web look at multiple ways a website can exercise persuasion. In the previous paragraphs, I noted several of the ways congregational websites exercise persuasion through links, imperative verbs, and the ways photographs are used. Interactivity is often identified as one of the significant ways persuasion is exercised on websites. Some scholars note two kinds of interactivity (Massey and Levy, 1999; Stromer-Galley, 2004). "Interactivity-as-process" or interpersonal interactivity on websites is parallel to personal face-to-face relationships. Congregational websites engage in this kind of interactivity most commonly through providing email links to staff members, and emergent churches use it in online forums and other opportunities for viewers to respond to the website with

their voices and opinions. The second form of interactivity, “interactivity-as-product” or content interactivity, happens when a set of technological features allows users to interact with the interface or system itself, for example clicking on a hyperlink to download an audio presentation or to move to another page. These kinds of interactivity communicate aspects of an organization’s identity because they express the priorities of the organization. Each choice to put a link on a web page is a choice not to put another link in that same place, and these choices communicate values. The accumulation of such choices, the patterns in those choices, communicates an organization’s values even more strongly. The many links on the megachurch sites to opportunities for engagement in small groups and service opportunities, the many links on the vibrant liberal/mainline sites to denominational resources, and the many links on emergent sites to virtual community parallel the stated values of these congregations, and thus reinforce the identity of the congregations as communicated on their websites.

Interactivity-as-process and coproductive interactivity (Xenos and Foot, in press) both have connections with the concept of heteroglossia, that balance point between unitary and diverse forces. Unitary forces are represented on congregational websites by photos of church buildings and ministers in robes, statements of faith, and words about the Bible, Jesus and truth, and these unitary voices are essential in order to have a central, unifying focus for congregational life. On the other side of the spectrum, diverse voices on congregational websites come through the posting of personal stories, photo galleries that show congregation members in action, lengthy announcements that convey some of the intent of the event planner (the “novel” that lies behind the event), and art galleries that show the work of congregation members. Interpersonal interactivity in the form of online polls or discussion forums also contributes a place for diverse voices to be heard. This balance point between unitary and diverse voices that Bakhtin (1981) calls heteroglossia is essential for congregations to navigate because it parallels the Biblical priority of one faith coupled with multiple gifts, diverse ways to serve, and a variety of actions (I Corinthians 12:4-6). This balance point will continue to be significant for congregations, as pluralism and

secularism compete with the central message of the Christian faith, and as cultural diversity at times verges on chaos.

All three kinds of churches expressed the centrality of the Christian faith in one way or another on their websites. The megachurch sites contained statements of faith most frequently, the vibrant liberal/mainline sites referenced Jesus most frequently and based their inclusive welcome on biblical values, and the emergent sites grounded many of their priorities, particularly the arts and community, in Christian theological principles. All three kinds of churches expressed a commitment to diversity: the megachurches in their invitations to so many forms of service, learning, and group activities; the vibrant liberal/mainline churches in their verbal, and sometime visual, affirmation of inclusion and diversity; and the emergent churches in their more extensive use of interpersonal interactivity and in their language about the kind of community they hoped to develop. Therefore, all three kinds of congregational websites create a healthy tension point between unity and diversity. The analysis of the websites indicated that the megachurches appear on first glance to affirm diversity more than they actually do, because their websites make such good use of diverse graphics. Yet on closer analysis they have a strong unitary voice. In contrast, the vibrant liberal/mainline churches appear on first glance to affirm diversity less than they actually do, because their websites appear more traditional and connected to print media and traditional sources of authority like ministers and buildings. On closer analysis they have a strong commitment to diversity.

This discussion about heteroglossia focuses on the resources used on the websites, arguing that all churches attempt to find a balance point between unity and diversity, between voices that draw the viewer towards a single unitary view of reality and other voices that express diversity and multiplicity. The structure of websites echoes this tension. Websites are based in precise, detailed digital technology. Links provide connections to URLs, which must be written correctly in every detail. Websites can be structured like databases, with information that is entered in one place programmed to appear in several other places. Yet this precise and concrete technology

can be used in wildly creative ways, and congregational website producers employ a variety of colors, fonts, styles, graphics, and photos, as well as words, to try to communicate the essence of their congregations. Unity in diversity, and diversity in unity, are written into both the structure of websites and the life of the congregations represented on the sites. Finding this balance point is one of the central challenges for congregations, and perhaps for all kinds of organizations, as they consider the design of their websites and their choices of verbal and visual resources for the sites.

Congregations need to provide a space for the authentic voices of members while affirming the central purpose and identity of the congregation.

Scholars who study the rhetoric of the web also examine the use of traditional tropes such as metaphor, synecdoche, and hyperbole. Burbules (1998) suggests that links be viewed as metaphors, where meaning is transferred from one idea to another, and synecdoche, where the particular stands for the general. The frequent use of the family metaphor on the Saddleback Community Church website, in photos and in verbal text, carries over into the links as well. The links to small groups, classes and service opportunities could be viewed as the means by which people engage with this family of faith. In fact, since so many of the megachurch websites seem to convey the sense of being busy, bustling families, the links they employ to the “family” activities could be viewed as metaphors. Many of the megachurch websites used links in the form of graphics, and the graphics seemed to communicate something about the activity they were describing. In that sense the links use synecdoche; a particular graphic stands for the general activity. Burbules argues that hyperbole, another trope, is common on the web, and many of these websites do seem to make promises about the nature of congregational life that are hyperbolic. No church of more than 2000 members can be as intimate as a family, yet the megachurches appear to make that promise. No church can include everyone completely, as the vibrant liberal/mainline churches appear to promise. And no church can provide a place for totally authentic relationships, as the emergent churches claim to do. Hyperbole appears to be built into the website medium, as it is perhaps built into the advertising genre upon which

websites draw. The persuasive power of metaphor, synecdoche, and hyperbole, identified for more than 2000 years by scholars of rhetoric, continues in the website medium.

Social Semiotics and Websites

Chapter six laid out the task of social semioticians, to document and catalogue the use of semiotic resources and then to situate the use of those resources in historical, cultural, and institutional contexts. The semiotic resources on congregational websites, which have been documented in many ways in this study – the words, photos, graphics, and links – occur in our present time but in many cases they draw on patterns and issues from the past, a characteristic most evident on the emergent church websites with their evocation of Christian history as a source of authority. These semiotic resources inhabit the American Protestant Christian culture, but they also touch the wider culture because websites are available to be seen by anyone who is interested. They also draw on the wider culture through their embrace of the advertising medium; U.S. viewers of these websites, no matter how deeply committed to the Christian faith they may be, have seen hundreds of thousands of advertisements over their lifespan and they bring memories of those advertisements to their engagement with the websites, whether or not they are conscious of doing so. Congregational websites are situated within the congregations as institutions and organizations, and they represent the identity of those organizations and contribute to the construction of that identity as well. Because the construction and use of websites is so new, and because so many congregational leaders apparently spend little time considering the nature of the websites attached to their congregations, websites are undoubtedly participating in the construction of the identities of congregations in ways that are largely unexpected and unexamined.

Interviews with the website producers revealed insights about the construction of congregational websites. In many cases, the website producers work independently, and the pastors and other congregational leaders trust the website producers to make appropriate choices for the site. Many pastors apparently give cursory attention to the

website, and, when they are involved, they focus most on generating verbal text about the congregation that website producers modify for the site. This raises serious questions about the nature of the representation of many congregations on their websites. So few people are involved in figuring out how to represent a complex organization using a medium that is very new, and equally few people are considering the ways that a congregational website might contribute to the identity formation of the congregation. Another significant issue revealed in the interviews is the deep sincerity of the website producers, several of whom expressed their confidence that by using the very best and latest communication strategies, they are helping to advance the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Only one of the website producers was concerned that the congregation might appear to be “slick” if she used too many photos and graphics like advertisements do. The others seemed unaware of the danger of commodification inherent in the advertising medium, including the danger of encouraging “window shopping” for churches.

Questions Raised by Congregations’ Use of Websites

As I reflect on the findings of this study, I am left with a significant question about websites: How will we be shaped by our increasing use of websites, in the same kinds of ways that we have been shaped by newspapers, magazines, photography, radio, television, and film? Websites can do so much. They are databases of information used by congregations to provide lists of resources, calendars, and member and staff directories. Websites enable connections to other organizations through links, which go far beyond providing a list of related organizations. Websites enable signups, online forums and discussions, donations, and selling. Hundreds or even thousands of photos can be posted on websites to capture aspects of congregational life. Websites provide opportunities for self-expression by individuals – ministers, congregational leaders, members – through personal homepages and blogs, which have both verbal and visual elements. This study revealed some of the ways websites are advertisements, promoting congregational activities. Action and information are merged on websites in a way unlike any previous medium. In fact, no other

communication medium comes close to doing all that a website can do, and our engagement with this medium is in its infancy. Our study of this medium is also just beginning. How are we changing because of the presence of this medium in our lives? How will we change? And how should Christians view this medium?

Another challenge comes from the connections of the website medium to the advertising medium. The website producers interviewed for this study stand in a long tradition of Christians who embraced the latest communication technologies to promote the Christian faith (Finke and Iannaccone, 1993; Carpenter, 1997; Finke and Stark, 2005; Noll, 2001; Smith, 1998). Beginning with Augustine, who taught principles of classical rhetoric to improve preaching, Christians have welcomed the latest means of communication: the printing press to produce books, pamphlets, and newspapers about the Christian faith; radio and television to broadcast worship services and evangelistic events; and now the web. A new question arises in our time. Are congregational websites, which in most instances draw on secular advertising techniques, somehow different than these earlier communication strategies because of the capitalism and commodification that are so embedded in twentieth and twenty-first century advertising? Or did the strategies of earlier Christians – pilgrimages, almsgiving, indulgences, icons – commodify the church and the Christian faith in their own ways? Are the forms of ideology that create and maintain power structures closer to the surface in discourse today, and thus congregations who employ websites need to be more careful than, say, a medieval preacher who was studying classical rhetoric to help him craft sermons that would motivate people to believe in Jesus Christ? These are the questions that remain in my mind as I read the texts of the interviews in the light of scholars and critics researchers who evaluate advertising.

For Future Study of the Website Medium

One significant area for further study related to the website medium is audience reception of the congregational websites. This study focused on the websites themselves and the website producers, but not on the ways websites are perceived by viewers. Studying the responses of people both inside and outside the congregations

would add richness and depth to this kind of study, and would help to answer the questions of how well a particular congregation's website reflects its members' perception of its identity and whether the website is shaping congregational life as well as representing it. Another area of future study was suggested by one of the website producers, who wondered how much it benefits a congregation to hire professional website designers. Does a professionally designed site attract more visitors? Are larger website budgets correlated with more people becoming members? Staying members? A study of website budget and membership trends, coupled with interviews of website viewers, might reveal some interesting information. Additional study could also be focused on various forms of virtual community, such as polls and discussion boards, examining whether they increase the "stickiness" of congregational websites and whether they have an impact on membership and congregational perceptions of community.

Websites offer fascinating opportunities, and many congregational leaders seem to be largely unaware of the possibilities. The emergent churches are beginning to use online discussion forums as a way to augment their small groups and sermons. More churches are making use of the practical opportunities afforded by websites for signups, contributions and bulletin boards of photos of congregational activities. As I write this conclusion to my dissertation, blogs are exploding as a communication medium for congregational leaders (Bailey, 2007). If I were beginning this study today, I would certainly include much more investigation of blogs by congregational leaders. Pastors and other congregational leaders need to pay attention to these opportunities and challenges presented by this new communication medium instead of leaving the production of congregational sites in the hands of one or two individuals who are comfortable with the tools of production. Based on this study, I conclude that congregational website producers desperately need "critical friends" (Campbell, 2003a, p. 216) who will help them think critically and theologically about the website medium and its close connection to advertising. Pastors and other congregational leaders need to embrace the need for "critical friends" of the website medium. Thus far this chapter

has centered on issues related to websites, the object of analysis of this study. Now I turn to the larger issue, the congregations whose websites were examined, to provide a summary of the results of this study regarding the three kinds of congregations studied. I begin with a summary of some of the theoretical background presented earlier that will provide essential theoretical grounding for this discussion.

The Congregations

Church membership and attendance data from the twentieth century demonstrate the decline of Christian liberalism and the rise of conservative Christianity (Kelly, 1972, 1978; Hunter, 1987; Chaves, Konieczny, & Barman, E., 1999). Numerous viewpoints have been advanced to explain this phenomenon, including Kelly's theory that strictness explains the growth and decline of religious movements. Finke and Stark (2005) argue that the market economy provides a better explanation. In their view, conservative Protestant churches and organizations simply did a better job in competing in the twentieth century religious marketplace. They have made brilliant use of the media. They have presented a clear spiritual outlook that has been well communicated, and they have offered relevant programs and forms of community life that have met the desires of Americans more effectively than progressive religious bodies have done. Scholars such as Wuthnow (1988) argue that church membership and attendance data reflect the greatest division in American Christianity, liberalism versus conservatism, which cuts across denominational boundaries. The popular press describes these religious trends in ways that accentuate a binary view ("religious right" and "religious left"). Indeed this binary is reflected to some extent in this study. The megachurches and emergent churches usually expressed evangelical theology, while the vibrant liberal/mainline churches emphasized inclusiveness as a central theological principle, seemed more interested in embracing other religions as a possible source of wisdom, and came from a variety of denominations that have been declining in membership for decades.

In contrast to a binary view, the work of many other scholars reveals the complexity of religious trends in American culture. Woodberry and Smith (1998) note that while conservative Protestants are generally conservative on some theological and social issues, they are often innovative in worship styles and other areas; in their words, “Their resistance to modernity is highly selective” (p. 26). Moreover, there is greater diversity in their views than among the general public (as measured by statistical mean). Green, Rozell, and Wilcox (2003) studied religious right political activism in 13 different states and found diverse patterns and remarkable complexity. Frykholm (2004) describes the multidirectional flow of meaning between the conservative religious subculture and the broader culture: “We need to understand evangelicalism as sharing the field of popular culture, shaping it, and being shaped by it” (p. 184). She notes that American evangelicals are often enthusiastic participants in popular culture, enjoying movies, television, print media and other media alongside the rest of Americans. Evangelicals, Frykholm notes, seldom separate themselves from popular culture even as they complain about its immoral content. The work of these and other researchers affirms Christian life in the United States as a mosaic or a mobile, rather than the forced binary that is reported so frequently in quantitative studies and in the popular press.

Sociologist Fred Kniss (1997) agrees that a simple conservative-liberal binary is inadequate to describe the divisions in American Christianity, and he presents a model based on continua which he lays out on two axes. His model provides a helpful framework for summarizing many of the findings about the three kinds of congregations in this study. Kniss’s first axis, charted horizontally in Figure 7.1, describes the location of moral authority, the basis for understanding of good, beauty and truth. On the modernist end of the spectrum, the individual is the locus of moral authority, and an individual’s reason and experiences are the ultimate authority. On the other end of the spectrum, the traditionalist view holds that ultimate values are grounded in the moral authority of the collective tradition. In the case of Protestant congregations, authority would be grounded in the Bible and the traditions of a

Christian movement or a particular congregation. The second axis, charted vertically in Figure 7.1, describes where moral action should be targeted. This is the location of the moral project, which becomes the foundation for particular policies. The libertarian end of this spectrum asserts the primacy of the individual, and the focus of policies is to maximize the life of the individual. The ideal economic system is the free market. On the communalism end of this spectrum, the submission of individuals to the common good is emphasized, and the state is expected to promote these values by redistribution of resources and by limiting individual self-interested actions.

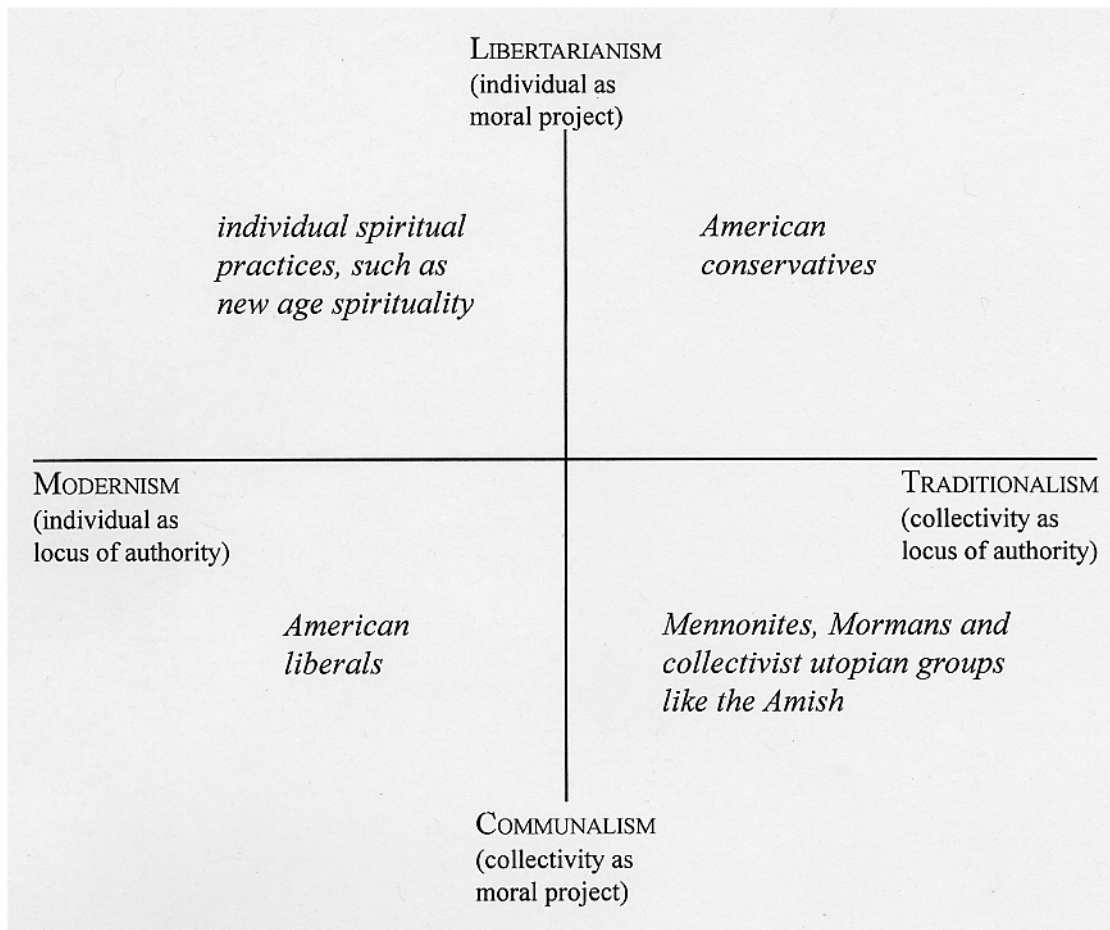


Figure 7.1 - Graphic representation of American religious ideological discourse (based on Kniss, 1997)

These two axes result in four quadrants. Kniss (1997) argues that conservatives are individualistic (libertarian) in viewing the moral project, but emphasize the collective (traditionalism) in locating moral authority, while liberals are individualistic in locating moral authority (modernist) while emphasizing the collective in the moral project (communalism). Kniss believes that Mennonites, Mormons, and some collectivist utopian groups such as the Amish emphasize the collective both in locating moral authority and in determining the object of the moral project. He does not locate any Christian groups in his fourth quadrant, where individualism is emphasized in the areas of both moral authority and the moral project. That quadrant would likely contain some of the people who engage in individual spiritual practices that are common in our time, including new age religious practices. Kniss's categories explain some of the complexities of the liberal-conservative debate in American Protestant religion today. In the popular press, both conservatives and liberals accuse each other of not emphasizing the communal enough or of emphasizing it too much; according to Kniss each group emphasizes the communal in different aspects of their priorities. Communal values coming from tradition motivate conservatives in the area of source of moral authority, while communal values motivate liberals in the desired outcomes of their ministry and service. Both liberals and conservatives accuse each other of focusing too much – or too little – on the individual, and again each group focuses on the individual in a different arena. Liberals value individualism in the realm of making moral decisions, while conservatives value individualism in the outcome of Christian ministry, via personal piety and devotion. Kniss's model provides a helpful framework for discussing the characteristics of the three kinds of churches as revealed by this study.

Because megachurches and emergent churches are evangelical, located at the conservative end of the theological spectrum, Kniss (1997) would likely argue that they would occupy the upper right quadrant of his diagram, while vibrant liberal/mainline churches, because of their liberal convictions, would apparently occupy the lower left quadrant. However, this study showed that each of these kinds of congregations has

unexpected characteristics in the way they represent themselves on the web. As Kniss would expect of evangelical churches, the megachurch websites in this study were largely traditionalist in their source of authority, placing high value on the Bible as a source of authority and, in many cases, stating clear congregational norms. Evangelical churches have long been viewed as emphasizing individual salvation over community life (Wuthnow, 1988; Noll, 2001), which would place these churches on the individualistic end of this second continuum. Indeed, the megachurch sites in this study emphasized personal spiritual growth. However, much of the verbal description of congregational activities affirmed the belief that individual growth happens in relationships in small groups, on mission teams, and while working with others on service projects. While the megachurch websites used the word “community” less frequently than the other two kinds of churches, their websites were structured in a way that invited the viewer to get involved, with many links to questions visitors might have, small groups, educational opportunities, and ways to engage in service. Individual salvation was mentioned on some megachurch websites in verbal text on pages deep within the website, but the homepages of the megachurches spoke of vibrant community with many options for engagement. Evangelical megachurches, based on their self-representation on their websites, would probably occupy the right side of Kniss’s diagram, embracing traditional sources of authority, but they would occupy both the top and bottom quadrants on the right side, because they emphasized both individual personal growth and communal faith activities.

With respect to vibrant liberal/mainline churches, Kniss (1997) would argue that their source of authority would be likely to be individualistic. In contrast, this study showed that vibrant liberal/mainline churches, in their self-representation on the web, were more closely connected to their denominations than the other two kinds of churches. They were more likely to use the word “Jesus” on their homepages, and they often referenced Jesus or the Bible as the source of their inclusive values. They argued that the heart of the Christian faith, based in the Bible, is inclusive welcome. This study focused on liberal/mainline churches that were vibrant; it did not include

liberal/mainline which were failing to thrive. Perhaps these vibrant congregations were alive and functioning well precisely because they did not find their authority in individualistic values as much as other liberal churches do. Based on Kniss's model, liberal churches would be expected to locate the moral project, the foundation for specific policies, in the collective rather than the individual. Indeed, the vibrant liberal/mainline church websites in this study affirmed their commitment to collectivity in the moral project through their words about inclusive welcome and their discussion of the kind of inclusive community they wanted to offer. Their embrace of connections with their local community also argues for a commitment to communal goals in ministry. In addition, the vibrant liberal/mainline websites in this study used the word "community" more often than the megachurches. This is not the whole story, however. Vibrant liberal/mainline congregations in this study used the words "connect" and "relationship" significantly less often than the other type types of churches, which may indicate a weaker commitment to communalism, and they used the word "growth" as frequently as the megachurches, which argues for a commitment to individual spiritual growth. Most significantly, they talked extensively about inclusive community, but their websites were the least likely of the three kinds of churches to be structured in way that enabled such community to happen. They were the least likely to offer links to information for newcomers, FAQs, and to small groups, and they were less likely than the megachurches to offer links to educational and service opportunities. I conclude from this study that vibrant liberal/mainline churches, on their websites, may be committed to the goal of inclusive community, but they often lacked the specific tools that enable such community to happen. Individuals apparently have to find their own paths to involvement in the congregation, which indicated a functional individualism in the midst of a lot of words about community. This study indicates that these vibrant liberal/mainline congregations, then, occupy the same two quadrants on Kniss's chart as occupied by the megachurches but with distinct differences. Both megachurches and vibrant liberal/mainline websites affirm Christian tradition and the Bible as sources of authority; however, they choose different components of Christian

tradition and different values from the Bible to emphasize. With respect to the purpose of ministry, the megachurch sites may emphasize individual salvation, but they are functionally collective, while the vibrant liberal/mainline sites may emphasize inclusive community, but they are at least somewhat functionally individualistic.

On the emergent church websites, their embrace of the collective both in their source of moral authority and in their practices of ministry was hard to separate. The emergent churches, because they are evangelical, would be expected to embrace the collective as a source of moral authority on their websites, and this research indicates that they did. Not only did the emergent sites reference the Bible as a source of authority, they also expressed a commitment to engage with the values and practices of ancient Christianity. The collective was also the focus of the moral project for these churches. They offered more links to virtual community than the other congregations (blogs, chat, polls, message boards, and groups). Their websites were second after the megachurches in links to small groups. They were deeply committed to the arts, which they viewed as a communal activity. They used the words “community,” “connect,” and “relationship” the most frequently, and their discussions of these concepts were rooted in theology, with an emphasis on the character of God as communal. This almost seamless connection between the communal both as impetus and goal contrasts with both the megachurch and the vibrant liberal/mainline sites, which portray both individualistic and communal aspects to many areas of congregational life. The emergent churches, then, as they portray themselves on their websites would be located in the same quadrant with Mennonites, Mormons and the Amish in Kniss’s (1997) study.

All three kinds of congregational websites showed signs of embracing the individualism of the American culture. All three kinds of churches drew on the advertising medium on their websites, a medium that encourages individual consumption. The emergent church websites seem to be most grounded in communitarian values and activities, yet their evocation of trendy coffee houses implied the individual choice of whether to participate or not in community, and indeed

verbal text on several of the websites conveyed permission to participate or not in congregational activities. Finke and Stark (2005) cite research they conducted in 2000 indicating that when people seek religious experience, the demand is highest for religions that offer “close relations with the supernatural and distinctive demands for membership, without isolating individuals from the culture around them” (p. 275). All three kinds of churches in this study did this well in their self-portrayal on their websites, even though they did it in different ways: the megachurches, with their contemporary and “relevant” worship and their ability to create connections for newcomers; the vibrant liberal/mainline churches with their inclusive community; and the emergent churches with their emphasis on history, the arts, and authentic community. In addition, the individualism and consumerism encouraged by the use of advertising techniques on congregational websites could be viewed as a way that congregations connect members to the culture around them. Finke and Stark’s study also indicates that people do not want religions that demand total submission, nor do they want religions whose God is distant and powerless, and all three kinds of churches seemed to strike that balance. Finke and Stark believe that as the God of the Protestant mainline becomes more distant, less powerful, and offers fewer guidelines for living, mainline groups will continue to decline. The vibrant liberal/mainline congregations in this study, in the way they portray themselves on their websites, appear to have avoided these pitfalls. This study has revealed multiple dimensions of these congregations that may indicate why these three kinds of congregations were thriving and how their ministries reflected Finke and Stark’s research on what Americans want from their congregations.

This study has also raised areas of concern. The megachurch websites encouraged service to the poor apparently without any visible concern for the structures of injustice that create poverty. Their deep embrace of consumerism as a model for Christian community was reflected not only in their website design but in their provision of so many personalized options for the people who attend. This was both their strength and their weakness: strength because they enabled people to get involved

and grow in faith, and weakness because the underlying consumerist presuppositions were not addressed. The vibrant liberal/mainline congregational websites had a powerful voice for inclusive values, but they seemed to have genuine difficulties in creating opportunities for their people to engage in the kinds of practical activities, particularly small groups and service opportunities, that provide concrete places for people to act in their beliefs. All too often their websites seemed to reflect the old adage, “all talk and no action.” The primary weakness of the emergent church sites lies in their targeted appeal to a particular generational style. This is their strength because they appeal to generations that are often uncomfortable in traditional church, but it is also a weakness because the church needs to transcend generational priorities. Despite the emergent church embrace of historic Christian disciplines, they seemed to be situated in a particular time, place and culture to an unbalanced degree. I now turn to a discussion of the questions that remain unresolved in my mind as I complete this study.

For Future Study of Congregations

Phillips (2005) uses the metaphors of garden and circus to describe the opportunities and challenges facing Christian congregations today. She writes that the Bible portrays the place where God’s people dwell as a garden, rich in growth and full of fruitfulness and life. In contrast, she suggests that most Christians live their lives more like a circus with multiple acts vying for attention under the big top, and she asserts that most congregations foster this atmosphere of frenzied activity. Heightened levels of attention are necessary in order to cope with the overstimulation that arises from so many circus acts happening at the same time. Absent is the sense of resting in a fruitful (and peaceful) garden. Congregational websites often appear circus-like, with an array of information and opportunities, each one trying to be “sticky” enough to keep the viewer there for a while. The viewer is urged into becoming a consumer of the circus acts. Because websites draw on the advertising genre, viewers see the photos and words, and perhaps even the links, through the lens of the memories of hundreds of thousands of ads that have come before, each one of them encouraging consumption in

some form. Can congregational websites in any way encourage the viewer into a garden rather than a circus? And would that be just another form of advertising?

Questions related to the garden and circus metaphor could be fruitful directions for further study of congregational identity and persuasion on websites. Other directions could be fruitful as well. Additional kinds of congregations could arguably present directions for the church of the future: Roman Catholic congregations, because of their increasing voice in our culture and their interesting alliances and differences with evangelicals, and Unitarian Universalist and Jewish congregations because of the rise of progressive religious voices in politics. In addition, the evangelical movement has many strands, including Pentecostalism, the African American Protestant tradition, the historic peace churches, churches in the holiness movement, as well as churches rooted in historic fundamentalism. Examining characteristics of these separate movements would likely reveal interesting and helpful insights. With respect to the specific aspects of the websites that were studied, web pages related to children and youth ministries were ignored, and it was clear from cursory glances at those pages that they present fascinating glimpses into the congregation's priorities. Many of the websites talked about stewardship of money, tithing, and Christian money management, additional topics that would undoubtedly reveal insights if studied. The language used to describe helping people was acknowledged briefly in this study, but much more work could be done on that topic, since all three kinds of churches engaged in service opportunities and talked about the need for Christians to make a difference in their communities and in the world. The concept of inclusion was so central to the vibrant liberal/mainline congregation's self-presentation that it would be a good idea to study other words associated with inclusion, such as welcoming, open, and affirming, to examine the ways they were used. Faith, identity, and the web are fertile relationships for future scholarship. To summarize more aspects of the study, I now turn to a metaphor of place that has resonance in discussing these three kinds of churches.

A Third Place

This study set out to explore aspects of contemporary congregational life that might reflect directions for the church of the future. A concept that reveals insights along those lines is idea of a “third place.” Oldenburg & Brissett (1982) cite the coffeehouses and public houses of Europe, particularly in previous centuries, as examples of a third place. In the global South, a card game in a public square is another example. Neither the home nor the workplace, a third place provides a location for sociability and nondiscursive symbolism, which Oldenburg and Brissett describe as idiomatic, spontaneous, colorful and freewheeling conversation, steeped in stories and emotional expression, in contrast with conversation that is instrumental and pragmatic, used to give directions, solve problems, buy merchandise, write contracts, and talk with clients. A third place can host a spectrum of kinds of personal involvement, and is often a site for informal connections between people of different ethnic or socioeconomic groups. American society in the late twentieth century had very few third places. All churches have characteristics of a third place, but to the extent that the conversation in a church is instrumental and pragmatic, the identification of a congregation with a third place is diminished.

Of the three kinds of churches, emergent churches affirmed on their websites their desire to create places where conversation can be driven by personal stories and authentic self-expression. They alone used very few images of the congregation as a family; indeed they seemed to want to create a third place apart from the family. When Oldenburg and Brissett say that the loss of third places results in spiritual poverty, a malnutrition of the soul, they sound like leaders of an emergent church. The concept of heteroglossia intersects with this concept of a third place. All churches need to hold the Christian faith as their centering principle, but they also need to maintain that center in tension with a diversity of spiritual gifts, ways of service, and voices of personal experience. The emergent churches held that tension well, allowing the voices of congregation members to speak as if the websites themselves were third places, while also foregrounding the central tenets of the Christian faith. The nature photos –

flowers, trees, beaches, mountain vistas – that are present on some congregational websites may be an attempt by website producers to create something like a third place. One of the vibrant liberal/mainline interviewees talked about the flower photo on her congregation’s website as a sign of “a place to go for hope and redemption.”

What might a “third place” church look like, a congregation that draws on the best that these three kinds of churches have to offer? The megachurches would contribute their excellence in creating multiple pathways for people to get involved. A third place church would resemble megachurches in offering opportunities to do things with others – service, outreach, and practical helpfulness for people both within and outside the church – as well as places for learning and venues for sharing personal needs and hobbies. With an increasingly mobile society and a tendency for religious opportunities to be just one more commodity, this ability to enfold newcomers and members is significant and valuable. A third place church would have enough going on that everyone could find a place to fit in, but not so much that it felt frantic or overstimulating. Like the vibrant liberal/mainline churches, a third place church would provide a strong and warm welcome, and it would communicate what its values are and explain the connection between those values and the historic Christian faith rooted in the Bible. Participants would be invited to join not only in activities but also in shared values. A third place church would have a strong interest in the arts, and the significance of the arts as grounded in Christian theology would be articulated as it is in the emergent churches. Also like the emergent churches, a third place church would create places for honest and authentic conversation, full of stories, the kind of conversation identified by Oldenburg and Brissett (1982) as idiomatic, spontaneous, colorful and freewheeling. This kind of conversation would happen in face-to-face settings and online, and the congregation’s website would be an integral part of the way the congregation creates a third place.

Ideally, the leaders of a third place congregation would be very aware of the semiotization that has been occurring in our culture, that we have grown dependent on symbolism, imagery and design in our construction of social, political, and economic

life (Lash and Urry, 1994). Congregational leaders of a healthy third place congregation would be conscious of their engagement with symbolism, imagery and design, the ways they portray their congregation as a busy, happy family like the megachurches, the nurturing parents like the vibrant liberal/mainline congregations, or the trendy coffeehouses of the emergent churches. They would be cautious about drawing on images of consumerism. They would respect the sincere and noble intentions that their staff and volunteers bring to the task of website design, while being aware of the power inherent in ads. They would be aware that the increasing use of websites by congregations will shape people of faith as individuals and will shape congregational life as well, and they would carefully observe this phenomenon.

Websites are here to stay, at least until the next new communication technology comes along, both for congregations and for a host of other organizations and businesses. Congregational life in all its richness and diversity is increasingly represented on websites, with newcomers searching for churches using websites, members accessing their congregation's website to listen to sermons or check the date for an upcoming class, and photos and words on homepages representing complex congregational identities perceived in a glance. Ministers and congregational leaders often appreciate the role of congregational websites in attracting new people, and they write text for website announcements, but not many of them embrace the challenges this medium presents. Few ministers and congregational leaders are "critical friends" of the website medium, engaging with site producers to discuss and evaluate visual components of the sites, consider issues of consumerism and commodification of congregational life, and explore the ways websites are shaping congregational life. This challenge is one of the major issues for the future of the church that came out of this study.