

The Future Church:
Identity and Persuasion on Congregational Websites

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Abstract

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Because of demographic shifts in church attendance over recent decades, rising secularism, and the influence of other world religions, religious leaders are engaging more frequently in discussions about future directions for Christianity in the United States. Three kinds of Protestant Christian congregations in the United States were chosen because they seem likely to represent future directions for the church: evangelical megachurches, because each year a higher percentage of church attenders in the United States attend megachurches; vibrant liberal/mainline congregations, because of the growing focus on progressive Christian voices in politics; and emergent churches, because of their young demographic and surprising influence in spite of their small size. The websites of these three kinds of churches were studied, because websites are a place for self-presentation at the initiative of the congregations and because websites are a communication strategy that seems likely to influence future directions for congregations. The websites were examined to discover the ways the congregations presented their identities and exercised persuasion. Three kinds of analysis are presented. Content analysis was used to examine 60 websites, 20 in each of the three categories, to provide a descriptive analysis. Secondly, an interpretive analysis presents the results of a rhetorical study of the websites of two congregations in each of the three categories that were chosen as exemplars of their movements. Third, 10 website producers were interviewed and all the data was reviewed using critical analysis influenced by social semiotics. Findings include differences in website components and strategy. The megachurch websites excelled in providing opportunities for engagement in small groups, service

opportunities, and classes sponsored by the congregation. The vibrant liberal/mainline websites presented a strong ethos of inclusive welcome and commitment to justice based on the values of Jesus. The emergent church websites stressed community and the arts, grounded in theological reflection in a way that was unique to them. Many of the website producers expressed their enthusiasm for the use of the secular advertising medium for promoting the Christian faith in congregations, and many indicated they work independently from the pastoral staff and lay leaders of the congregation.

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