Chapter Five
Demand, Diversity, and Community: An Interpretive Analysis of Six Congregational Websites

"We cannot underestimate the power of words that shape our viewpoints and understanding of what a 'church' is, and how it is supposed to function." This statement from the website of the emergent church Vintage Faith[100] summarizes the purpose of this chapter: to continue to look at the power of discourse – both words and images – on six congregational websites that shapes our viewpoints and understanding of how each one portrays itself and functions as a church. This interpretive analysis, using rhetorical criticism, continues to present patterns in features and vocabulary that contribute to the conceptual framework of this study, interpreting the patterns in the ways the features and vocabulary are used on the sites. Brummett (1984) writes that one of the ultimate goals and justifications of rhetorical criticism is "to teach people how to experience their rhetorical environments more richly" (p. 103). Jasinski (2001b) adds that rhetorical criticism "reveals the way perspectives are crafted, circulated, and subverted" (p. 262). I examine the richness of the rhetorical environments of these websites and the way the perspectives are crafted – and sometimes subverted – using several rhetorical theories as lenses. In particular, I look at the websites in the light of two traditional rhetorical theories, audience and genre, and a less well-known third one, Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia, and I also consider the way the sites engage with the concept of community. As is common in rhetorical analysis, I also draw from scholars in other disciplines; in this case work by Kress and van Leeuwen (1999) and Fairclough (2003) in critical discourse analysis. The goal of this chapter is to continue the analysis begun in chapter four by providing more unified, holistic and coherent pictures of the three kinds of congregations. These pictures will help to provide insight into the two research questions of this study: In what ways do congregations present

[100] Downloaded October 17, 2006.

their organizational identity on their websites? In what ways do congregations encourage and enable engagement on their websites? The congregational websites were observed intensely over a three month period from mid-June to mid-September 2006, and then less frequently for seven weeks from mid-October to early December 2006.[101]

Megachurch Websites: Sophisticated and Strategic

Congregational websites are usually created with two audiences in mind: people who already attend the church and people who are looking for a church. These two audiences 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 each audience. A Google search using the church's name produced, first of all, the site www.saddleback.com (hereafter called "Saddleback's visitor site"), which addressed questions and issues of people looking for a church or planning to visit Saddleback. Several items later in the list of Google search results was the church's second site, www.saddlebackfamily.com (hereafter called "Saddleback's member site").[102] Saddleback's two sites represent the two major audiences for congregational websites. In nine of the ten interviews conducted for this study, the website producers talked about these two audiences for their congregational websites. Most of them talked about the choices they made of features and verbal text to appeal to both audiences. Saddleback made explicit this dual focus by using two separate websites.

The homepage of Saddleback's visitor site was simpler than its member site homepage, with more white space, fewer links, fewer graphics, giving it a more serene and peaceful look. (See Figure 5.1.) 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. The nature photos,

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[101] The six congregations studied are: megachurches Willow Creek Community Church and Saddleback Community Church, vibrant liberal/mainline churches Seattle First Baptist and St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church, and emergent churches Cedar Creek Community Church and Solomon's Porch. Their addresses and URLs are listed in Appendix A.

[102] Google search conducted October 26, 2006.

which included flowers, tropical fish, and a pool of water, invoked peace and serenity. About half of the photos of people appeared to be stereotypical families, including a family of four, a group of nine adults and children that appeared to be two families, and a man and woman with their arms around each other. In the photos of families, all the people were gazing directly into the camera, while in the other informal groupings of people who might be friends or acquaintances, about half were looking at 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.

Figure 5.1. Saddleback Community Church, homepage for visitors. The four photos of people and a cactus plant were part of a slideshow with a total of 18 photos of people and flowers, tropical fish, and water (www.saddleback.org, downloaded January 20, 2007).

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. (See Figure 5.2.) The member site updated frequently with changes in text, announcements of upcoming events, and new graphical links. Some aspects stayed the same over the months I examined the site: the links to age-related ministries for children, youth, and young

adults; a graphical representation of the congregation's five purposes that is also a link; a graphical link to small groups; and information on basic introductory classes for adults. The second megachurch, Willow Creek, in a suburb of Chicago, combines information for regular attenders with information for newcomers on one website and is explicit in its information for potential visitors and newcomers. On the homepage, a question mark graphical link is accompanied by the statement "New to Willow? Look here."[103] (See Figure 5.3.) Some of the other pages on the website have a box labeled "New to Willow Creek?" with six links, four of them in the form of questions. (See Figure 5.4). Willow Creek's link for newcomers on the homepage is typical of many megachurches, as shown in the previous chapter, but the presence of links for newcomers on other pages of the website is unusual and may be one of many factors that has contributed to Willow Creek's phenomenal growth. Links for newcomers, spread all over the website, give newcomers multiple opportunities to get basic information about the congregation.

[103] All quotations and observations in this paragraph were downloaded/noted on October 26, 2006.

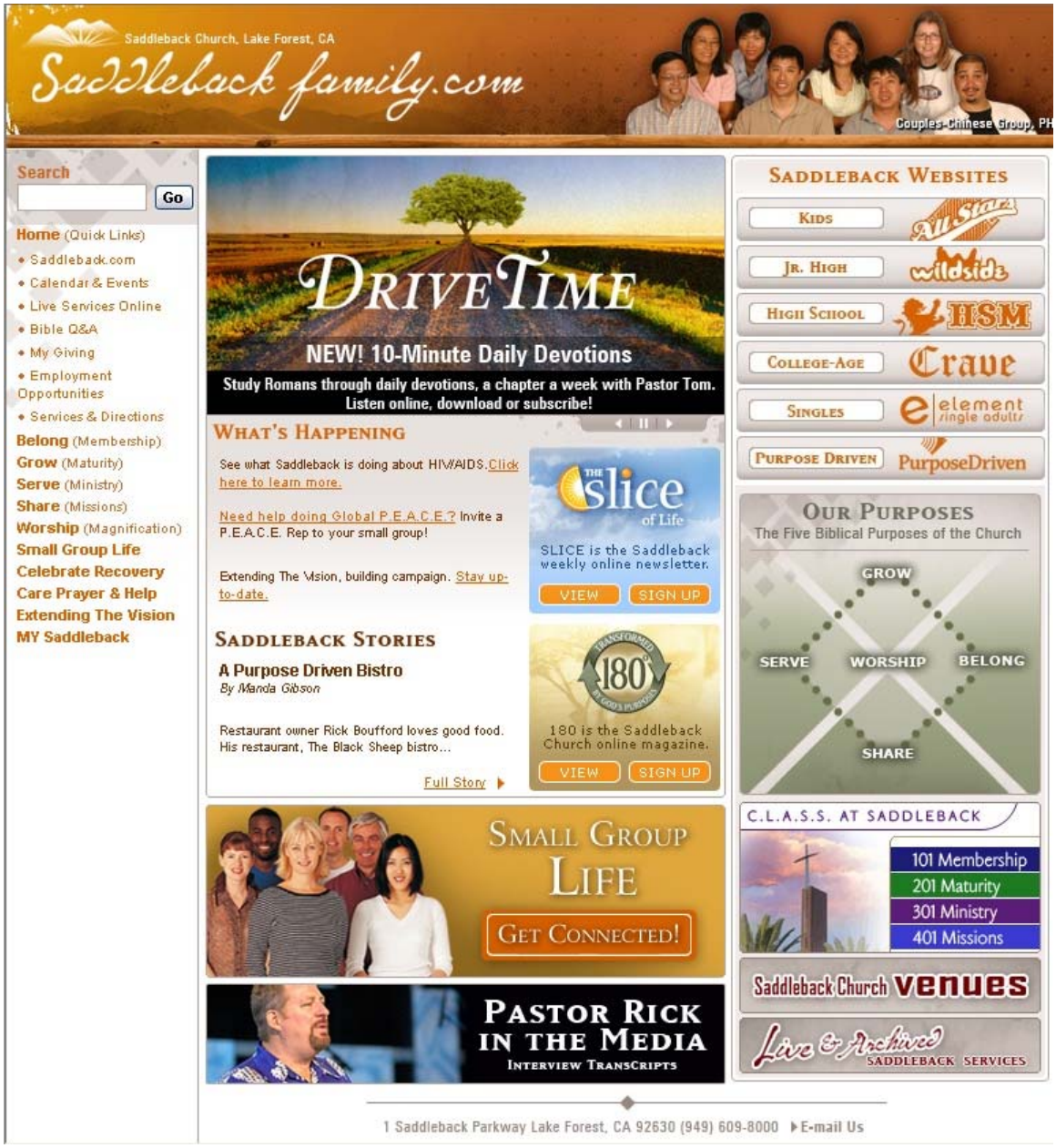

Figure 5.2. Saddleback Community Church, homepage for members. This page had three slideshows: in the upper right where 5 photos of different small groups rotated, in the upper middle where “Drive Time” was shown, and at the bottom where “Pastor Rick in the Media” was shown (www.saddlebackfamily.org, downloaded January 20, 2007).

Figure 5.3. Willow Creek Community Church, homepage. In the upper left, the circular photo of a woman was part of a slideshow with more than 20 individuals pictured. In the upper right, the box with “student impact” was part of a slideshow of events, and a third slideshow was located under “News at Willow” (www.willowcreek.org, downloaded January 22, 2007).

Figure 5.4. Willow Creek Community Church, links for newcomers, found on numerous pages of the website (www.willowcreek.org/wondering.asp, downloaded January 23, 2007).

Some scholars argue that rhetorical practices constitute or construct the identity, the sense of self, of the audience (Charland, 1987); another way of describing this phenomenon is that texts imply or invoke an audience (Jasinski, 2001a). The numerous photos of people on the megachurch website homepages, gathered into "family" groupings on both of the Saddleback sites and smiling into the camera on the Willow Creek site, established a sense of identification with those in the pictures: engaged in relationship with friends and family members, content and happy. The audience invoked appeared by their dress and demeanor to be middle class, not disabled and slightly racially mixed but mostly white and heterosexual. Chaim Perelman argues that the audience's "views of the real and the preferable, as imagined by the speaker, must form the initial common ground between speaker and audience, the starting points of argumentation" (Gross, 1999, p. 204). According to Perelman, what is real includes what the audience views as normal, and what is preferable includes what the audience values and views as good. Congregational websites construct an argument using words and visual components. For potential visitors, the argument centers around reasons why the viewer should engage with this congregation. For current members and attenders, the argument centers around further engagement with this congregation. In an age of

church shopping among multiple options for church, websites play a role in keeping church members happy and involved. All three kinds of websites in this study appeared to be attempting to establish what is real or normal, and they tried to appeal to what they imagined the audience values and views as good or what they imagined to be desired by potential visitors to the site. In the case of the megachurches, reality or the normal was conveyed as being heterosexual, slightly racially mixed but mostly white, middle class, and happily engaged in family life. Intimate relationships and family relationships were valued, as were joining, belonging, and connecting with this congregation. The view of what is real and what is valued seemed clearly laid out and fixed by the church, so the audience was encouraged into a fairly narrow path of joining or engagement, albeit with multiple options of how and where to engage.

Genres on Megachurch Websites

Examining the genres that are referenced on websites gives us further information about the strategy of the congregations which create the sites. 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, 2001a). 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. Organizational 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.). Any of these elements can range in quality from poorly done to sophisticated, so the websites themselves vary in overall level of quality. Congregational websites fit into the organizational website genre, presenting the organization's identity, priorities, values and goals (Esrock and Leichty, 1998; Winter et al, 2003), and they vary widely in complexity and quality.

Genre as a rhetorical concept originated in the writings of Aristotle (1991), who described genres of speeches. Scholars began to argue that some speeches were actually hybrids of two or even three of those genres (Jasinski, 2001a). With the proliferation of forms of communication came a proliferation of genres, bringing Aristotle's total of three to a much greater number, limited only by the ability of critics to describe and defend the genres they propose. With the increase in the number of genres comes the possibility of even greater hybridization. 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, in part because they draw on material that used to be, and often still is, scattered all over the church building: photos from bulletin boards, calendars from newsletters, mission statements from brochures for newcomers, and sermons from church libraries. Each of the six websites I examined fit within the organizational website genre, but each had characteristics of other genres as well as I will demonstrate below, so I am arguing that each of these websites is actually a hybrid genre. This assessment is helpful because it enables the viewer to see more clearly the way the church's perspective was crafted.

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 shoehorned 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 seemed a bit scattered because of the diverse ministries of the church and because the site often offered 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. Their text, graphics, links, and layout indicated that they sought to maximize their use of their website. 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 because they were so obviously designed by professionals.

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 (see Figure 5.2). 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 people were pictured, all gazing into the camera, all posed relatively formally. The people were all adults, 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 (see Figure 5.3). 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 use of head shots implied an intimacy between the viewer and the person in the photograph (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1999). Because the Willow Creek photos were tightly cropped, they seemed to be less formally posed than the Saddleback photos. Both of these websites, nonetheless, drew on the genre of family photo album. The Saddleback site was a more formal album, with studio quality

photos, while the Willow Creek site was a more informal family photo album. In both cases the probable purpose was to communicate that these very large churches could be small and intimate, like a family. 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 were designed to persuade the viewer to do or purchase something. For example, 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. The sites had complex, contemporary graphics and high quality photographs. 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). Although there were no explicit demands made of site visitors, Kress and van Leeuwen’s concept of “demand gaze” can be extended to characterize the overall ethos of these two megachurch websites, which implicitly and explicitly encouraged viewers to respond by coming to the church and joining into activities. Carolyn R. Miller advocates a kind of classification by genre based on consideration of social or situated actions rather than syntactic or semantic analysis. Her approach could be called “ethnomethological” because “it seeks to explicate the knowledge that practice creates” (1984, p. 155). The megachurches, with their family photo albums, complex and numerous graphics, imperative verbs and announcements that resembled

advertisements, were strenuously urging a particular social and situated action: come and engage in our congregational activities.

Multiple Options within a Unified Voice

These options for engagement on megachurch sites and the way they were presented raise another issue. In our post-modern, fragmented culture, Bakhtin's (1981) concept of heteroglossia is essential for congregations: a tenuous balance point between centripetal and centrifugal forces, movements that pull us towards a unitary voice and contrasting movements that push us in directions that are scattered and disordered. Our culture draws us outward, pushing us toward diversity and multiple options to such an extent that many people feel they have lost any centering principle around which to orient their lives. Churches want to express that they have a unique opportunity to offer something significant in the midst of the fragmentation that people experience every day; they hope to offer a timeless message that will help draw people closer to a center and provide a balance to the chaos of the culture. The concept of heteroglossia captures the essence of this point of balance. In churches, a balance point is needed between the centrality of faith and a fragmented world, and the balance point between the biblical mandate of affirming one faith, one Lord, and one Spirit, while also affirming multiple ways to act, serve, and use one's gifts (I Corinthians 12:4-7). Congregational websites, like all discourse coming from congregations, must navigate this path between unitary voices and diverse voices, and these "voices" can be found in verbal text as well as in photos and graphics (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996). The nature of this balance point between centripetal and centrifugal forces varies in the web discourse of the three kinds of congregations in this study.

On the two megachurch websites, multiple options for engagement, multiple photos and graphical links, and the diversity in the graphics expressed the congregation's complexity and the fact that people have numerous options for places to join in. No one path for engagement in congregational activities predominated; no particular way of serving God was platformed above other ways; multiple worship services and numerous fellowship groups and ministry opportunities provided places

for connection for people with different needs and desires. On the Willow Creek website, dozens of links connected the viewer to pages that described diverse programs such as cancer support, divorce recovery, grief support for children, men's breakfasts, senior connections, marriage matters, and health ministry. While a diversity of ways to engage was highlighted with words and visuals, both websites were tightly structured and few distinct voices were represented. The announcements of events were so brief that the voices of the event planners were largely lost. There were no links to outside organizations. The photos were tightly cropped or formally posed, so little was visible of the context of the photos; therefore the story that lay behind the photo was almost impossible to discern. Both websites occasionally used stories or testimonies from individuals within the congregation, but they were brief and focused on the benefits of the congregation's ministries. The Willow Creek homepage had a link labeled "Spiritual Questions? Look here" which led to a page with three paragraphs about being a spiritual seeker. Below the paragraphs were five links:

1. Why do you want to know God?
2. Are you placing limitations on God?
3. What do you think about Jesus ?
4. How will you respond to Jesus?

Some Practical Helps[104]

Questions are a way to bring in diverse voices, so at first glance these questions appear to be dialogic. However, these questions are addressed to the viewer, not phrased in the voice of the viewer. These questions reflected a pattern that was common on both the Willow Creek and Saddleback websites. The congregational commitments to diversity lay in providing options on their sites for people with diverse needs to connect with the congregation's ministries, not in providing a place for varying voices. These websites presented an appearance of being dialogical and heteroglossic, but in reality they were tightly scripted.

The Saddleback member site had a link on the homepage labeled Bible Q and A, which sent the viewer to a page with 52 questions. At the top of the page was a

[104] All quotations from the Willow Creek and Saddleback websites were downloaded October 31, 2006.

statement, “The following questions and answers have been taken from actual questions from Saddleback members and the resulting answers from Saddleback Pastors’ [sic]. If you have questions about what Saddleback believes the Bible to teach on any topic that is not answered here, please contact your Small Group Community Leader.” The questions, then, reflected the voices of the congregation members and addressed a wide variety of topics from Saddleback’s perspective, such as homosexuality, stem cell research, abortion, marriage to an unbeliever, baptism, raising children, tithing, and healing. The answers were typically 3-5 paragraphs long, and each answer presented the viewpoint of the Saddleback pastors, without affirming in any way that Christians may differ in their positions on these subjects or that Christians may differ in their interpretation of the Bible. Missing on both the Saddleback and Willow Creek websites were many of the characteristics of dialogicality that were visible on the other sites, shown later in this chapter: statements that diversity was welcomed, places where the diverse voices of the congregation members could be heard, emphasis on the whole Christian tradition or other churches, photo galleries of artists presenting God’s truth in a variety of ways, or an emphasis on creativity or mystery.

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. We have already noted that megachurch websites evoked the genre of family photo album in the ways they use photographs. 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 three paragraphs which illustrated the use of these two metaphors (see figure 5.5):

> 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.
>
> As you look at the links on this page, you'll see a personal note from the pastors who lead our children's, student's and college groups. We hope this helps you to get a personal and friendly first look at Saddleback, but we realize that this is just a web site. 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, the Web site for those who call Saddleback home. This will give you an "insiders 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 the concept that the kind of families and homes being evoked to describe the congregation were happy, untroubled and traditional. The series of families pictured on the homepage of the visitor site were all smiling, healthy-looking, and appeared to be heterosexual. 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 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.

Figure 5.5. Saddleback Community Church, information for families, linked from the homepage of the Saddleback visitors site (www.saddleback.org/flash/family.html, downloaded January 22, 2007). None of the photos are slide slows.

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," and the description of that reason read:

> Most people who have been a part of a group say the greatest benefit is the close relationships and friendships that develop. They will frequently telephone each other during the week to share an urgent prayer request or an exciting answer. You'll discover that your needs and problems are not unique – we're all in the same boat. It helps to know that others are facing the same difficulties, or have lived through them and learned spiritual principles in the process. Over fifty times in the New Testament the phrase "one another" is used to describe our relationship to other believers. We are instructed to love one another, encourage one another, pray for one another, accept one another, bear one another's burdens, and build up one another. The only way you can obey these commands is in a small group! We really do need each other. God never meant for you to go it alone in the Christian life. If you're lonely, the answer to your problem is to join a group.

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's 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. And if you'd like to develop authentic and enduring relationships with others, then you'll be glad to know that new groups are forming all the time." 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?" and answered, "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 website 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 names 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!" These direct quotations are a form of dialogicality cited by Fairclough (2003).

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 megachurch sites 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. The paragraph from the Saddleback web page advocating joining small groups, quoted 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 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.

Identity and Engagement on Megachurch Websites

In summary, both Saddleback and Willow Creek used their websites strategically to express their organizational identities and encourage engagement. Saddleback's visitor and member sites encouraged involvement in ways that fit their separate audiences. In the same way, Willow Creek's links for visitors on the homepage and other pages allowed the congregation to articulate multiple paths to involvement that were appropriate for visitors and members. Both websites were hybrids, linking the website genre with characteristics of family photo albums and compelling advertisements. The sites exercised persuasion by drawing viewers into the family photo album and vigorously inviting participation through the use of the demand gaze and imperative verbs. The home/family metaphors, used both visually and verbally, evoked intimacy, contentment, prosperity, and health, and encouraged engagement with the congregation while also expressing aspects of the identity of the congregation: these churches were portraying themselves as both big and small. Both websites, through the ways they addressed their audience, invoked what was real and

what was preferable – family, home, health, vibrancy, and activity – and these values appeared to be closely connected to their identity as congregations. Their presentation of their identities as congregations were further revealed by the form of heteroglossia found on 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 few voices of congregation members were brief, the congregations' unitary voices were strong, and only one way to think about many issues of faith was articulated on pages that answered questions or expressed faith positions.

Vibrant Liberal/Mainline Church Websites: A Gentle, Informed Welcome

The two vibrant liberal/mainline churches, Seattle First Baptist and St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco, are much smaller than the two megachurches. While the two megachurches are non-denominational and evangelical, both of these liberal congregations are linked to a mainline denomination – the American Baptist Church and the Episcopal Church in America, respectively. However, these mainline congregations have 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 attender. Both of these sites exemplified the conventional organizational 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 the number of photos and graphics on their homepage and other pages were much smaller. Both First Baptist and St. Gregory drew on other genres in addition to the website genre, and I will begin examination of these congregational websites by considering the hybrid genres present.

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 (see Figure 5.6). 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, 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, indicating that these photos propose or suggest something rather than insisting. St. Gregory's photos "offer" rather than "demand." This contributes to a sense that St. Gregory's congregational activities are available for those who are interested and that people are welcome to participate. However, unlike the megachurches, strenuous urging is absent.

Figure 5.6 . St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church, photos of worship (http://www.saintgregorys.org/Liturgy/Photos/10am/Gathering.html, downloaded January 22, 2007).

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."[105] 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 (see Figure 5.7). 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

[105] Downloaded October 24, 2006.

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[106]. 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,[107] 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.

[106] On November 10, 2006.
[107] On October 24, 2006.

Figure 5.7. Seattle First Baptist Church, homepage. The sermon text in the right hand column continued for two more paragraphs, which are not visible in this view. The photo of the minister was a frozen frame in a video of her sermon (www.seattlefirstbaptist.org, downloaded November 1, 2006).

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 (see Figures 5.8 and 5.9). 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 homepage, 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). For these two mainline/liberal churches, what was real or normal was a highly educated form of choosing based on information, and what was valued was tradition, as already shown, and inclusion, as shown below.

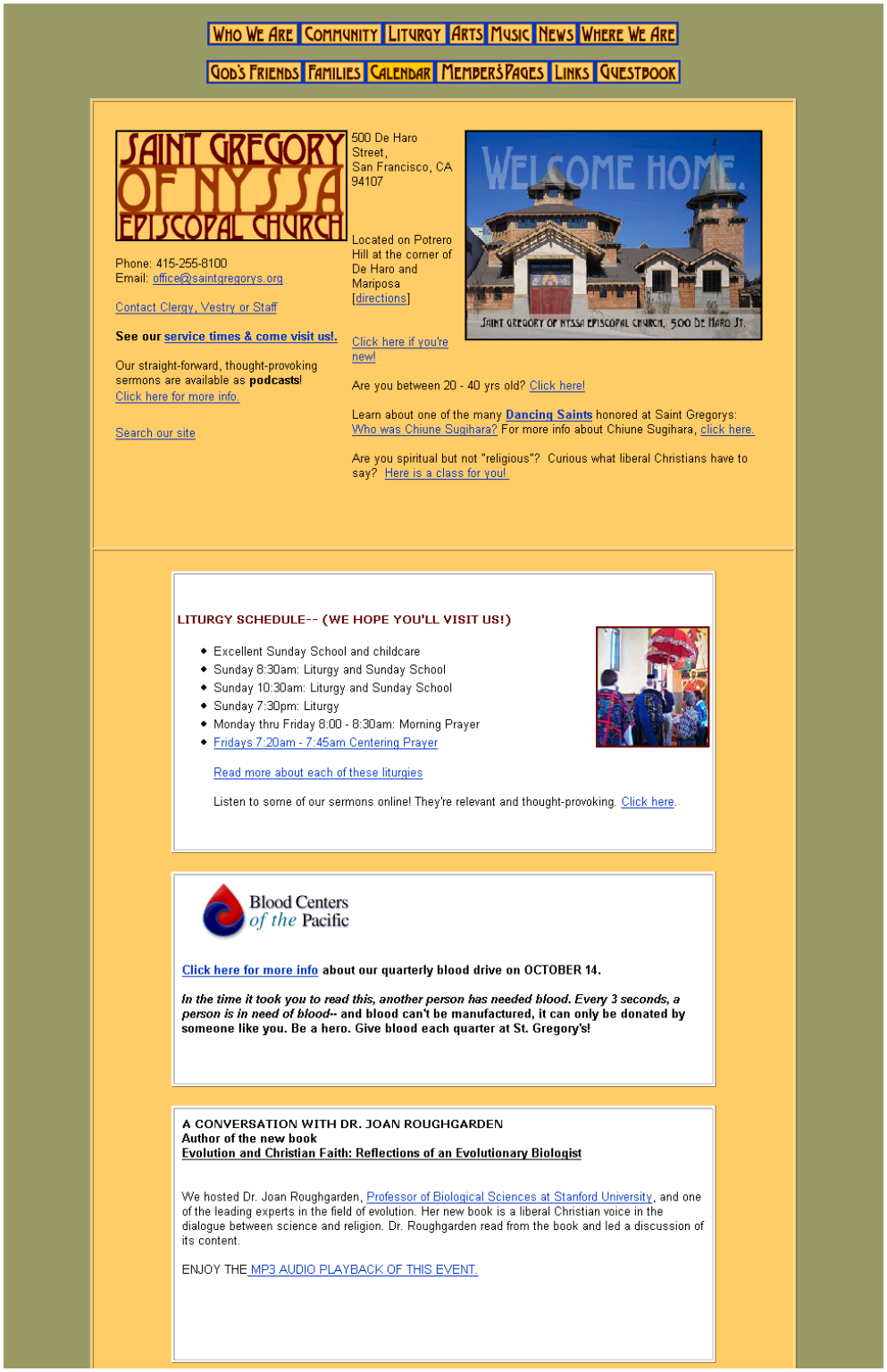

Figure 5.8. St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church, top half of homepage (www.saintgregorys.org, downloaded November 1, 2006).

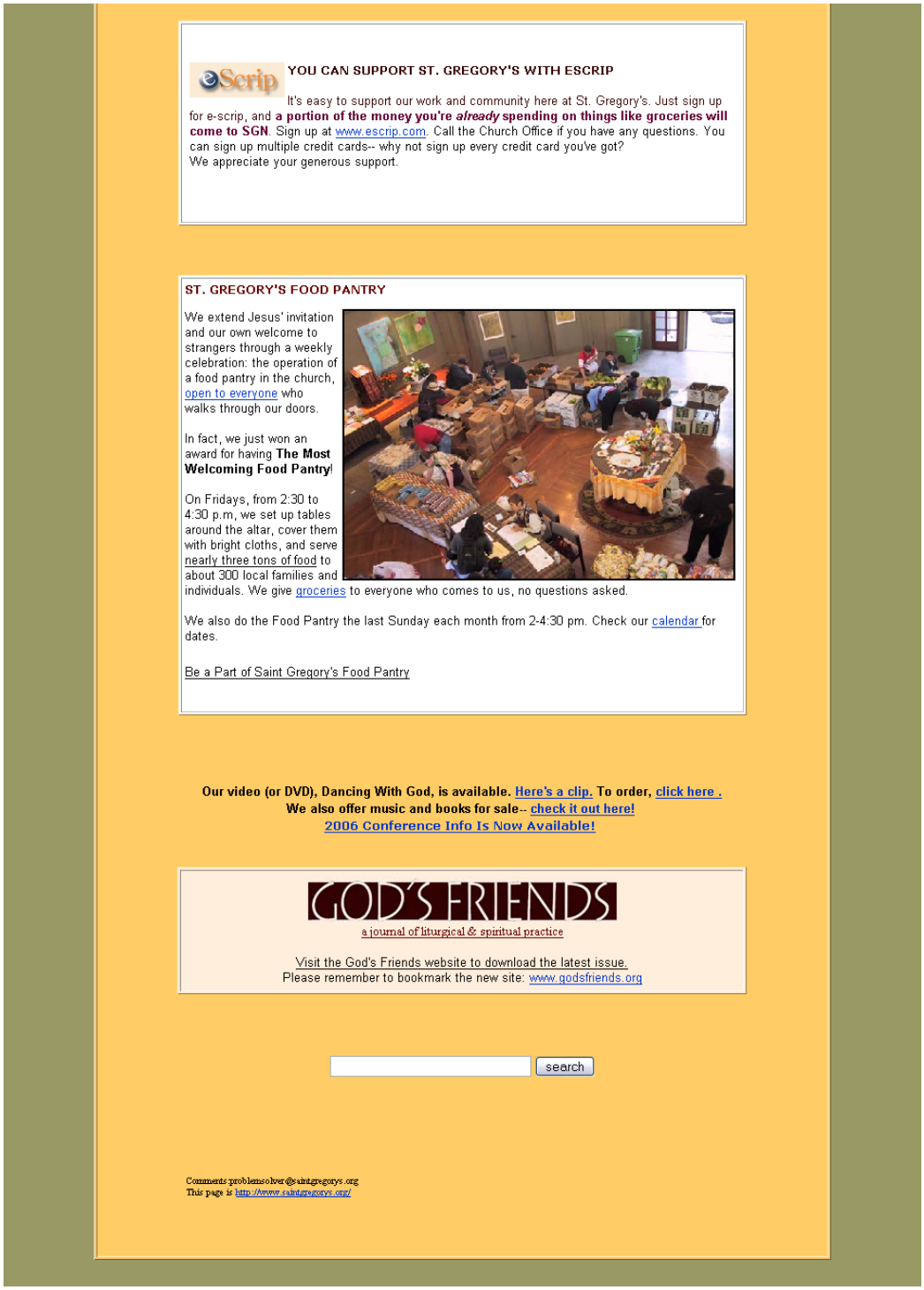

Figure 5.9. St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church, bottom half of homepage (www.saintgregorys.org, downloaded November 1, 2006).

Welcoming Diverse Voices

The concept of heteroglossia reveals insights about the ways these two liberal/mainline congregational websites balanced unity and diversity. The megachurch sites appeared to embrace diversity because their sites had so many options for involvement; upon looking deeper, the presence of a single unitary voice on many matters of faith and lifestyle could be easily found. The vibrant liberal/mainline churches were the opposite. Seattle First Baptist's website, for example, looked on first glance to use a strongly authoritative voice and allow few diverse voices, in part because of the homepage with its abundance of verbal text, the single photo of a minister in a black robe, and the presence of video and written text of the previous week's sermon.[108] Photos of congregational activities can bring an awareness of the many stories that members bring to congregation, but the entire First Baptist website used relatively few photos and, of those, many of the photos were posed choral groups or photos from the church's history. On the navigation bar, one of the nine categories was "gallery," and three of the "gallery" categories that might have brought a sense of diversity to the website – "people," "events," and "art" – were non-functional links. One of the three "gallery" links that worked show photos of the building, which yet again communicated an authoritative voice.

Yet the words and some of the photos on First Baptist's website were dialogic and expressed the congregation's openness to diverse voices, while affirming the centrality of the Christian faith. One example is found in the only part of the website that showed numerous congregation members in action, the part of the gallery that showed 33 photos of past peace marches that congregation members had participated in. These photos contributed a strong sense of diversity in action. A second example, another working part of the gallery, showed photos of the church building that had been morphed into amusing shapes, along with a "photo" of the Beatles walking across the street in front of the church (see figure 5.10), the only sign of humor on any of the

[108] All observations and quotations from the websites of Seattle First Baptist and St. Gregory of Nyssa were observed/downloaded on October 28, 2006

six websites I studied, and a sign of heteroglossia, balancing the congregation's love of the building with creativity of expression.[109] Bakhtin (1981) wrote: "Laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object, before a world, making of it an object of familiar contact and thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation of it" (p. 23), which reinforces the sense of freedom communicated through humor, as well as the invitation provided by humor to engage creatively with the subject at hand. In addition, on First Baptist's homepage, a three-paragraph description gave information about an upcoming three-week class using the DVD of a Roman Catholic writer talking about "living the questions"; both the speaker – a Roman Catholic speaking in a Baptist Church – and the topic brought diversity of voice, and the long description of the class on the homepage honored that diversity.

The mission statement, posted on the homepage, included the words, "As a Church we will know no circles of exclusion, no boundaries we will not cross." In the two paragraphs below the mission statement, labeled "About Us," a brief history of the congregation was given, followed by the congregation's affiliations, including being a "Welcoming and Affirming congregation," indicating that gays and lesbians were welcomed. The homepage had a link to "Distinctives," which was a list of 13 characteristics of the congregation, including statements about Baptist liberties, a commitment to justice and compassion, their identity as a "peace church," and a statement that men and women were equal partners. At the top of the "Distinctives" page was a statement set apart in large type (with the first and last sentences in black and the three middle sentences in green):

> As a church family, we want to help you find something you can do with your life that is even more extraordinary than what you are doing already.
> **It's *not* about becoming a Baptist.**
> **It's *not* about saving your soul.**
> **It's *not* about asking you for money.**
> **It's about all of us helping one another to live our lives with passion and service.**
> (bold in original)

109

Another link from the homepage, to “communal values,” took the viewer to a list of eight values which included valuing each person’s spiritual journey and their freedom to shape that journey; valuing diversity of opinion, ethnic diversity and diversity of lifestyle; valuing traditional Baptist liberties; and being welcoming and affirming. All of these intentional statements affirmed the congregation’s openness to hearing diverse voices, which balanced the authoritative voice in the pictures of the black-robed pastor and the traditional building.

Say "Cheese"
(February 2003)
Photo by: K. Whitlock

Secena Road
(January 9, 1935?)
Photo by: Archive

Figure 5.10. Seattle First Baptist Church, from the “Just for Fun” page (www.seattlefirstbaptist.org/Common/Gallery/Default.asp?rW=1024&rH=768&Gallery=fun&Header=Gallery%20Just%20For%20Fun, downloaded January 23, 2007).

The St. Gregory of Nyssa website also used both photos and words to communicate heteroglossia, the balance between unity and diversity. On the homepage, two advertisements brought diversity of voice: a encouragement to give blood, which used text and graphics from the blood bank, and a brief summary of a talk given by a Stanford professor on science and religion, with a link to MP3 playback of the talk. The website had a long page of frequently asked questions (FAQs), which brought in the presumed voices of questioners. The form of these questions in the voices of congregation members contrasted with the “spiritual questions” on the Willow Creek site, which used “you” (e.g. “Why do you want to know God?”). In addition, the congregation’s mission statement affirmed both the unity and diversity of heteroglossia: “St. Gregory’s Church invites people to see God’s image in all

humankind, to sing and dance to Jesus' lead and to become God's friends." The congregation had a separate purpose statement: "Our purpose is to invite people of the San Francisco Bay Area to discover that they are God's friends, and in practicing God's friendship to find their unity with all people." Four subpoints under the purpose statement, describing how this purpose would be met, expressed the heteroglossic balance of centripetal and centrifugal language. The first two subpoints served as an effective illustration of this balance: "1. Celebrating Jesus' resurrection in worship drawn from Christian tradition and the whole human experience of God's friendship, and involving song, dance, music, quiet, prayer, communion, welcome, thankfulness, and compassion. 2. Listening openly for God's word in the Bible, with the help of accurate critical scholarship, as well as in Christian teaching and experience, in each other, and in God's friends of other faiths." The references to Jesus' resurrection, the Christian tradition, God's word in the Bible, accurate critical scholarship, Christian teaching and experience are centripetal, while "the whole human experience" and "God's friends of other faiths" are centrifugal, as are the multiple options for engaging in worship.

The most visually effective expression of heteroglossia on the St. Gregory's website was the array of photos of the worship services, the building, and the icons on walls of the sacramental space. The photos on the website, with their accompanying text, made clear that the traditional aspects of the Christian faith (centripetal speech) were honored here: The Word of God was so important that it had its own space. The Sacraments were equally honored with their own part of the building. Both Word and Sacrament were so central that they were celebrated with robes of gorgeous fabrics from all over the world and with dancing and singing. Yet the fabrics from around the world were centrifugal, as were the words in the letter for newcomers, which stated twice that the congregation desired to be inclusive, and the website viewer could see in the photos of worship services that diverse people had accepted that invitation. In addition, photos of the worship space included Ethiopian crosses and several objects from the Buddhist tradition. This diversity provides heteroglossic balance to the

authoritative speech of Christian tradition. The icons of the dancing saints continued the visual representation of heteroglossia. On the website, the photos of the icons were accompanied with brief biographies that explained their connection to the Christian faith and to Christian values (centripetal speech) while their diverse visual representations brought a variety of visual "voices" (centrifugal speech). Both First Baptist and St. Gregory affirmed on their sites the centrality of Christian tradition using photographs and words. However, while First Baptist invited diversity largely through its use of words, St. Gregory's invited diversity both with words and photographs and illustrated the way that diversity was experienced in the congregation.

Explicit Inclusion and Embrace of Diversity

The concept of community promoted by First Baptist Church and St. Gregory of Nyssa on their websites 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, <u>indoctrination doesn't fit our needs</u>.

> The other way is by becoming a Learning Community. Seattle First Baptist Church has always had vital classes, and it has been a 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.
>
> We do seek to be a transforming community and we believe that God is the source of this transformation. As we make new commitments toward being a Learning Community, we open ourselves to God's transforming power at work in our midst. [Underline in original.]

The vocabulary used in the first paragraph provides a vivid illustration of unity and diversity: "a message . . . an agenda . . . a set of values" coupled with, in the same paragraph, "varied messages, visions, agendas and values." 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. She used a warm conversational tone: "We'd love to talk with you . . . there is really no substitute for a personal greeting, a warm handshake, an understanding hug." She acknowledged that visitors likely had many questions, and that people who had previously had bad experiences in churches often felt very comfortable in this church. 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 a vivid expression of heteroglossia, 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.”

Identity and Engagement

These two congregational websites placed a high value on many of the traditional values of the Christian faith, like the two megachurch sites did. Yet the description of Christian community on these two mainline church websites was quite different than that of the megachurches. On these two church sites, a certain type of community was intimately connected with the Christian faith: community that was diverse and inclusive, with many different voices encouraged and welcomed. Classes at First Baptist included a Buddhist-Christian dialogue. St. Gregory’s, in its mission statement, said it “invites people to see God’s image in all humankind.” This broadness of inclusion as an essential part of community on these two church sites gave a different focus than was found in the two megachurch websites, and was a key aspect of the identity presented by these vibrant liberal/mainline congregations. A few direct invitations were present on these sites. One of the few imperative verbs on the First Baptist website was “Worship With Us” at the top of the center column of the homepage, words that did not change in the months I observed the site. The St. Gregory’s letter for newcomers, linked from the homepage, encouraged people to visit the congregation. However, the bulk 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. The liberal/mainline churches 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.

Emergent Church Websites: Trendy Coffeehouses

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 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 in theology, 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[110] were dreamy artistic montages of photos and graphics (see Figure 5.11). The photographic elements included a tree, a part of a building, and a person's shadow on a cracked sidewalk. Cedar Ridge Community Church[111] had six photos of individuals on its homepage, and all the photos were slightly out of focus, eliminating any comparison to slick advertising (see Figure 5. 12). Further, the photos also differed in style, gaze and color, conveying an artistic approach, and each of the six photos linked 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 consisting of a photograph 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 online interaction 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

[110] On October 19, 2006.
[111] On October 19, 2006.

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.

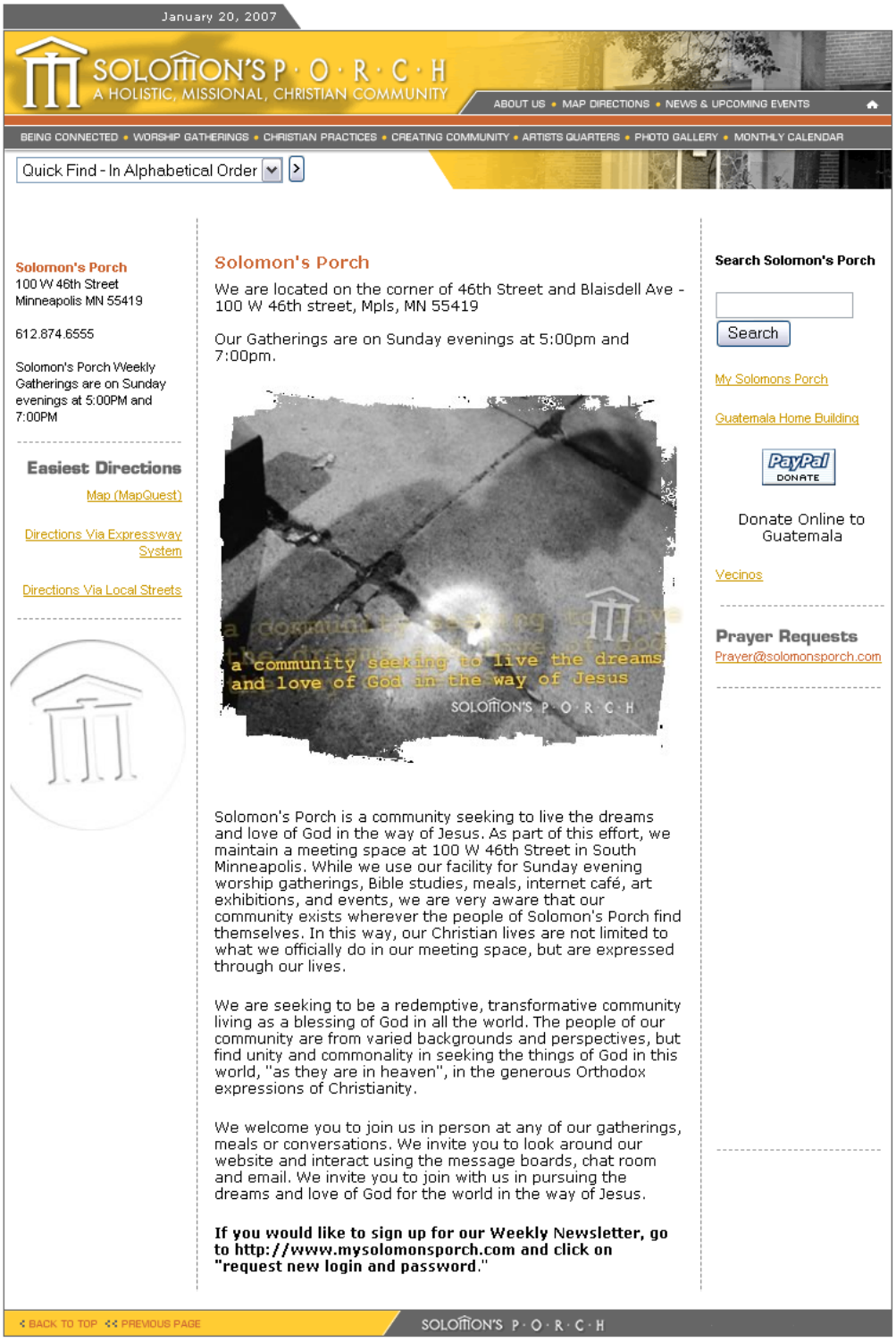

Figure 5.11. Solomon's Porch, homepage (www.solomonsporch.org, downloaded January 20, 2007).

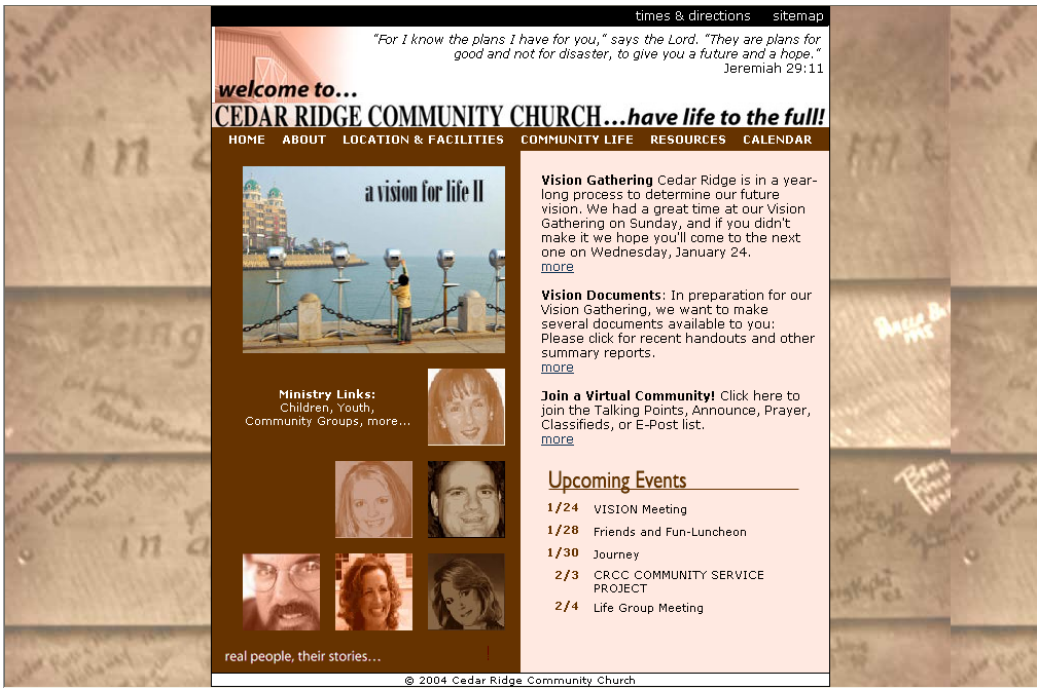

Figure 5.12. Cedar Ridge Community Church, homepage. The quotation at the top of the page varied each time the page was loaded in. The six photos of individuals linked to personal stories by each of the six people (www.crcc.org, downloaded January 22, 2007).

Indeed, 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' coop, 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 these websites seemed to appropriate was a trendy, eco-friendly coffee bar offering a contemporary art display and wireless internet connection.[112] The ability of

[112] 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 coffeehouses. Both articles were written by pastors, one in Illinois and one in Washington state. One pastor works part time as a barista, and he described what he learned about Christian ministry

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 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 other photos on those sites that show 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 megachurch sites, with their strenuous encouragement to participate.

Creativity, Innovation, and Mystery

The balance between centripetal and centrifugal speech on the emergent church websites had a different feel than what was found for the two liberal/mainline churches and the two megachurches. The Solomon's Porch homepage had three paragraphs describing the congregation, with the following paragraph first:

> Solomon's Porch is a community seeking to live the dreams and love of God in the way of Jesus. As part of this effort, we maintain a meeting space at 100 W

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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 coffeehouse parallels what I observed on the emergent church websites.

> 46th Street in South Minneapolis. While we use our facility for Sunday evening worship gatherings, Bible studies, meals, internet café, art exhibitions, and events, we are very aware that our community exists wherever the people of Solomon's Porch find themselves. In this way, our Christian lives are not limited to what we officially do in our meeting space, but are expressed through our lives.[113]

Several aspects of this paragraph drew on Christian tradition and provided language that kept the congregation centered: the meeting space, the worship gatherings and Bible studies and the purpose statement "a community seeking to live the dreams and love of God in the way of Jesus." However, maintaining the meeting space was described as only a part of meeting that purpose; the expression of the Christian life continued all week long through the daily lives of the people in this community, a statement that embraced diverse expressions of faith lived out in diverse settings. On a page labeled "Our Dreams," a 23-bullet point list contained centripetal items such as:

- We listen to and are obedient to God
- People who are not Christians become followers of God in the way of Jesus
- Those who are not involved in church would become an active part of it
- People are deeply connected to God in all of life; body, mind, soul and spirit
- The kingdom of God is increased in real ways in the world
- The Biblical story of God is told and contributed to
- People learn the ways of God and are encouraged to make it central to their lives

In addition, the list contained items that are centrifugal or that represented that balance point between forces drawing inward and outward:

- Beauty, art and creativity are valued, used, and understood as coming from the Creator
- Joy, fun and excitement are part of our lives
- We value innovation and are willing to take risks in order to bring glory to God.
- Everyone is equipped to do ministry
- People participate in the kingdom of God in accordance with their abilities and gifts
- Peoples' visions and ideas of ministry come to life
- God's Spirit takes precedence over all structures and systems
- Other churches are valued and supported

[113] All material from the Solomon's Porch website downloaded October 28, 2006.

Beauty, art, creativity, joy, fun, excitement, and innovation take people in diverse directions and encourage a variety of voices; the equipping of people to do ministry, using their various gifts and drawing on their visions and ideas, affirms that there are multiple ways of doing things; the stability of structures and systems was balanced with the free movement of God's spirit; and other churches' ways of doing things were affirmed and valued. These were heteroglossic, affirming diverse voices and encouraging multiple ways of doing things, while the centrality of the Christian faith, obedience to God and Biblical authority were also upheld.

The Solomon's Porch website also exhibited the affirmation of diverse voices in its art and music pages. The congregation members composed all the music that was sung at worship services, and music downloads were available on the website. The work of eight visual artists was highlighted with photos of their work, and three art shows were displayed that presented the work of numerous additional artists. The site had a page where original poetry could be submitted. Solomon's Porch homepage had no photos of individuals looking into the camera. The only individual pictured on the homepage was in a photo montage that included the congregation's logo, and the person's shadow on the sidewalk was pictured, not the person herself. This picture of a shadow, with no direct address, could be interpreted to give permission to the viewer to engage with this website, indeed with this congregation, in a variety of ways. Solomon's Porch, evangelical in its theology,[114] maintained on its website a clear picture of the centrality of Jesus Christ, coupled with the affirmation of many ways of expressing that faith.

Cedar Ridge Community Church also is evangelical in theology. Its website used this mission statement: "Cedar Ridge Community Church exists to help people have life to the full. We welcome people into a dynamic Christian community where

[114] Noll (2001) cites four questions that have been used in research to identify "evangelical conviction": crucicentrism ("through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God provided a way for the forgiveness of my sins"), biblicism ("the Bible is the inspired word of God" or "the Bible is God's word, and is to be taken literally, word for word"), conversionism ("I have committed my life to Christ and consider myself to be a converted Christian"), and activism ("it is important to encourage non-Christians to become Christians") (p. 31).

they can connect — with God, with one another and with opportunities to make a difference in our changing world."[115] On one website page, a 10-paragraph statement expanded on each phrase in the mission statement, with quotations from the Bible and references to Jesus and "the good news of Jesus Christ." These forms of centripetal speech were balanced on the homepage by six photographs that linked to long personal stories, as well as the invitation to engage in virtual community in a variety of forms. One of the intriguing features of Cedar Ridge's homepage was the quotation from a contemporary or historic Christian at the top of the page. Every time the homepage was loaded, a different quotation appeared. All of the quotations were Christian, but the diversity of authors mirrored the church's apparent openness to a diversity of voices. Cedar Ridge had a page on its website entitled "Our Values." Six pairs of words were listed as values, and each pair had a long paragraph description:

- Authenticity/Integrity
- Connection/Community
- Acceptance/Diversity
- Innovation/Creativity
- Balance/Wisdom
- Spiritual vibrancy/Mystery

These six pairs are distinctly heteroglossic, expressing the congregation's commitment to both unity ("integrity," "wisdom," "spirituality vibrancy") and diversity ("innovation," "mystery," and the word "diversity" itself). In summary, heteroglossia was just as present on the emergent websites as it was on the mainline/liberal websites. On the emergent websites, the centripetal language was verbal and more traditionally evangelical. The voices of diversity were not simply encouraged by the words and photos on the websites, but diverse voices were actually present in the photos by various artists (Solomon's Porch) and in the voices of congregation members describing their personal journey (Cedar Ridge).

[115] All quotations from the Cedar Ridge website were downloaded on October 31, 2006

Explicit and Missional Community

The emphasis on community among emergent churches has brought the issue into closer focus for many congregations in recent years, but 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 megachurch and mainline church sites in this study strongly emphasized connections between people. In this analysis of six congregational websites, the two emergent churches used the word "community" the most frequently. Solomon's Porch, in the three paragraphs on its homepage that we saw above, 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. The concepts of community and connection recurred frequently. Under "Holistic" was the statement: "Understanding that all areas of life are connected, including faith, time, family, work, body, money, intellect, et al." [116] Under "Missional" were several sentences expressing the congregation's commitment to serve God and their neighbors. The closing sentence read: "In this sense, Solomon's Porch doesn't have a mission; it is mission." Under "Community" were these words: "Desiring to share life with one another in a way that we become a living, breathing, local expression of the global, historical body of Christ." 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

[116] All quotations and observations in this section on community were downloaded or observed on November 2, 2006.

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, shown earlier, 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 "towards 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," believing that mission is essential to community, and community to our mission. This balance takes time, effort and vulnerability. But how 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? How can people experience the "life to the full" offered by Christ if they never laugh and cry and work and communicate and forgive and experiment and rest and work together, connected to God and one another in a dynamic community of faith?

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. As portrayed on their websites, engagement in community for these churches 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.

Identity and Engagement

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 congregational websites illustrated their welcome of the diverse voices of their congregation members by posting members' stories and artwork, and by making blogs and other forms of online interaction available. They practiced community on their websites, in addition to talking about it.

Conclusion

This chapter set out to provide an interpretive analysis of the three kinds of congregational websites through rhetorical analysis of congregational websites. This analysis continued the process begun in chapter four of presenting patterns in features and vocabulary that contribute to the conceptual framework of this study. In addition, this chapter provided an interpretation of the patterns in the ways the features and vocabulary are used on the sites, giving a more unified view of the three kinds of congregations. One more concept is worthy of note as this chapter comes to conclusion. As mentioned earlier, Warnick et al. (2005) describe a form of interactivity on political campaign websites that they call "text-based interactivity," which consists of "rhetorical techniques and features of the website text itself that communicate a sense of engaging presence to site visitors" (Warnick et al., 2005, introduction, ¶ 4). An oral style, in contrast to a written style, contributes to text-based interactivity. The six congregational websites explored in this chapter effectively use this form of interactivity. The informal style of the welcome letter on St. Gregory's website was a clear example. The author, despite being the webmaster for the congregation, portrayed herself as a just another member who enjoyed the ministers' preaching and the colorful worship services. She said she welcomed phone calls from people who had more questions, and she asked readers, when they visited, to find her and let her welcome them. On the emergent church sites, the slightly off-beat photos and the continuous emphasis on community conveyed a desire for interaction. The megachurch websites, with all their photos of individuals, their creative and contemporary graphics, and their descriptions of multiple options for engagement, gave the viewer a sense of interaction, a sense of "engaging presence." All of these websites made good or excellent use of the basic features of websites – text, graphics, and hyperlinks – and exercised a form of text-based interactivity that made their sites welcoming and encouraged engagement both with the site and with the congregation. All six of these websites were produced by churches that are viewed as successful by some or many observers; their websites engaged the viewer on multiple levels just as, presumably, these congregations engage

their members and participants in multiple ways in worship, activities, relationships and service.

In addition to providing avenues to engage with congregational activities and information for both visitors and members, the websites represent the identity of these three kinds of congregations. In chapter four I compared the congregations to lenses: the megachurches as mirrors, the vibrant liberal/mainline congregations as windows, and the emergent churches as cameras. After conducting the analysis in this chapter, the comparison to lenses remains, and I want to present further portraits that have emerged in my mind. Evangelical megachurches represent themselves on their websites as big, busy families. Everyone can find a place to be productive, everyone can find a few other likeminded family members to talk with on a regular basis, and everyone can feel happy about being a part of this wonderful, lively, and outgoing family. New people are strongly encouraged to join the family, and they are encouraged to believe that their unique needs will be met in the course of family life. Family members are free to talk in an intimate way to those they are close to, particularly to those who have the same needs and concerns that they have, but they don'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 – exercises 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 embraces traditional Christian values, and it functions 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 are not encouraged to be child-like in every way – many are encouraged to take leadership roles in small groups and ministries – family members are encouraged to be seen keeping busy serving and being involved with like-minded people, and they are not encouraged to think "outside the box" or to ask challenging questions. The family will be most effective in its functioning if all the family members keep busy and do their part, embracing the values of the whole family and letting the leaders speak for everyone.

In contrast, the vibrant liberal/mainline congregations present themselves on their websites as nurturing parents. Lakoff (2002) argues that conservatism, whether religious or secular, is based on the strict father model,[117] 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 several aspects. Vibrant liberal/mainline congregations find 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 vibrant liberal/mainline congregations provide a voice that encourages and embraces people on the margins. This voice is consciously oppositional to mainstream cultural values. While the megachurch as a big, busy family wants its members to be active in ministry, the vibrant liberal mainline congregation as a nurturing parent wants its members to have empathy for people in need. The vibrant liberal/mainline churches lack the structures, ranging from links on their websites to small groups to join, that the megachurches use to encourage involvement. The vibrant liberal/mainline churches do encourage engagement with the congregation as a whole, but in a less structured way, with the goal of helping members to embrace this ethic of empathy.

In contrast to both of the portraits above, the emergent churches present themselves on their websites as trendy, artsy, eco-friendly coffee houses, with options for face-to-face and online community if desired. They alone affirm a style of community that does not draw on family imagery or models. They affirm community

[117] 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.

and connection that are highly self-revelatory and honest; authenticity and the absence of masks are valued. The emergent church websites, in part because of their affirmation of authenticity, provide multiple opportunities for the voices of their members to be heard. Individual self-expression is valued. Just like the megachurches and the vibrant liberal/mainline churches, they value certain aspects of tradition that harmonize with their priorities. The emergent church websites express their value of 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 gives them a contemporary flavor, which is balanced in an interesting way by their love of ancient history and their embrace of evangelical theology. They talk deeply about the theological issues that undergird their values. Just like a person in a coffee shop might get into a long philosophical discussion about current events, emergent church websites engage the viewer in deep theological conversations about the ministry of the congregation.

These three kinds of congregational websites are all speaking to American cultural values, but in distinctly different ways. Through their websites, all of these congregations are meeting the desires of Americans who are looking to the Christian faith to guide their lives and help them find meaning. The megachurch sites provide multiple options for connecting and abundant resources for people with specific needs. Their websites invite engagement on every level, through photos, verbal text, and links. A person who wants a place to get involved easily and comfortably can probably find it at a megachurch. The vibrant liberal/mainline church sites provide a setting with strong, particular values which would probably be attractive to a minority of Americans: a passion for justice and inclusive welcome, connections with the traditional church through denominations, and engagement with the community institutions in the neighborhood of the congregation. The emergent church sites, likewise, provide a setting with values that seem likely to attract a different minority of Americans: people in the younger generations who want a deep and honest experience of community and want to engage with the arts, historic Christian disciplines, and

service to the poor. Each of these types of church websites seem to accept the values of the groups of Americans they attract; each seems uncritical of the societal patterns – the big, busy family; the nurturant parent; and the trendy coffee-house – that they reify in their communication on their websites. The next chapter will further explore the societal values that seem to be accepted and promoted by these congregations, the cultural messages that are visible in their historical and institutional contexts on the websites of congregations.