Chapter Six
Enterprise, Online Communication, and Community: A Critical Analysis Including Interviews with Website Producers

> In the beginning the church was a fellowship of men and women centering on the living Christ. Then the church moved to Greece where it became a philosophy. Then it moved to Rome where it became an institution. Next, it moved to Europe, where it became a culture. And, finally, it moved to America where it became an enterprise.
>
> – Richard Halverson, former chaplain of the United States Senate, quoted on the website of the emergent church Matthew's House[118]

Congregational websites commonly embrace the tools and values of advertising. In doing so, they perpetuate an impression of the church as an enterprise and, in addition, continue the process of constituting the church as an enterprise. In this chapter, I explore how this happens by demonstrating that congregational life as described and constructed on church websites has become semioticized – "that is to say, dependent on symbolism, imagery and design" and engaged with "the promotion of ideals, images and lifestyle in its discourse" (Aiello & Thurlow, 2006, p. 149; see also Lash & Urry, 1994). I use social semiotic analysis to present these issues. Van Leeuwen (2005) describes the work of social semioticians in two ways that are relevant to this study. First, these scholars "collect, document and systematically catalogue semiotic resources" (p. 4). The previous two chapters engaged in that task, examining the use of visual elements, verbal text, and links on congregational websites. Second, social semioticians "investigate how these resources are used in specific historical, cultural, and institutional contexts, and how people talk about them in these contexts – plan them, teach them, justify them, critique them, etc." (van Leeuwen, p. 4). This critical analysis considers the links between the semiotic strategies used and the

[118] According to http://www.matthewshouse.com/, these words were quoted in *The Awesome Power of Shared Beliefs*, E. Glenn Wagner (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1995). Downloaded November 10, 2006.

political-cultural economy of the congregations studied, including the power relations which frame the practices of congregational branding. This chapter draws on interviews with producers of congregational websites,[119] and the insights are substantial.

The chapter opens with an overview of the interviews, which illustrates the variety of people who are engaged in the creation and maintenance of congregational websites. I interviewed ten website producers, representing all three kinds of congregations studied. The interviews revealed the range of roles served by website producers, their depth of knowledge about marketing and advertising, and their intentions to accurately represent their congregations through the websites. After a summary of the website producers, the chapter discusses the ways websites represent the contemporary U.S. advertising genre, with insights from the producers. Next, I present the ways the website producers talk about the semiotic resources used on the sites, followed by a discussion of the website producers' discourses about computer-mediated communication and community. The chapter concludes with further portraits of the three kinds of congregations.

The People in the Interviews

The interviews illustrate the range of individuals who are involved with production and maintenance of congregation websites. I interviewed four megachurch website producers and all were paid staff of the congregations. In the first instance, the staff person spent only a few hours a week on the congregational website. She had worked full time on a children's curriculum published by the church, creating web resources for people using the curriculum. When the person who had designed and maintained the congregation's website quit, this woman was asked to maintain the congregation's site. She spent a few hours each week keeping it updated with verbal

[119] The interviews were conducted by phone, and I took notes on the phone conversations. Because of the restrictions of the University of Washington's Internal Review Board, I was not permitted to record the conversations. Nor am I allowed to identify the interviewees. Therefore, no specific church websites are mentioned here and no portions of the websites were captured to illustrate the ideas presented by the interviewees.

information supplied by the ministry areas of the congregation, but didn't change any photos or the look of the site. The second website producer was employed by the congregation 30 hours per week, first to design the website and then to keep it updated. Before being hired by the church, and while employed there, he had his own business designing websites. The third interviewee worked as a website designer before being hired full time by the church to design and maintain the congregation's website as his sole responsibility. He looked over the weekly bulletin and extracted information appropriate to the website, "clean[ed] it up" by shortening the verbal text and made it "visually pleasing" by adding graphics, and put it on the website. The fourth megachurch interviewee was the communications coordinator for the congregation, supervising a staff of three in addition to herself, all of whom had a background in advertising or marketing. The team of four oversaw the weekly bulletin, graphic design for all the church's publications, external marketing, and the website. Several on the team made updates and changes to the website, and one of the congregation's pastors was also involved with decisions about web content.

My interviews also covered three vibrant liberal/mainline congregations. The websites represented by these interviews were among those I considered to be the most complex and attractive. In each instance, the website producers were members of the congregation. In one case, the website had been maintained for many years by the church secretary, who added information about upcoming events without changing the structure of the website. When she left the church, a group of congregation members volunteered to plan a newly designed site. I interviewed one of them, who had a background in both marketing and Christian ministry, and he reported that the group had decided on a new design which would be launched a few months later, but they had not yet decided how the site would be maintained. In the second vibrant liberal/mainline congregation, the congregation's website had been designed and was maintained on a volunteer basis by a member of the congregation who was a professional website designer. She devoted many hours per week to the site, changing much of the text on the homepage, posting a new video sermon, and archiving past

sermons. The third vibrant liberal/mainline site was maintained on a volunteer basis by a congregation member who worked in marketing. She had designed the site for pay when congregational leaders advertised for someone to design a new site. After she had finished the design, she decided she wanted to maintain it for free as a part of her service to the congregation. In this role, she changed verbal content frequently and visual content from time to time.

In three interviews related to emergent churches, I talked with people in quite different roles. One of the websites was maintained by a church staff person. She oversaw all congregational communications as well as human resources, illustrating that staff in smaller congregations wear many hats, whereas staff of the megachurches often specialize in one area. I also interviewed two people associated with one emergent congregation. One of them, a pastor who served the congregation in partnership with one other pastor, had desired to increase the opportunities for online connections, so he searched for appropriate software to pursue this goal. After he found the software, he looked for web designers with expertise in it. The church was in California, and the web designer he found was in Canada, so they collaborated by email. I interviewed the Canadian web designer, who designed websites full time and had designed several other church websites. The site was designed so it could be easily maintained by people who are not experts in web design. Once the site was up and running, the website designer made only occasional changes to it by request. The homepage was maintained by the pastor, and the other pages of the site were maintained by various church staff and leaders, who added both verbal and visual content.

In sum, a majority of the ten people interviewed had a background in marketing, advertising, and/or professional website production. Some worked full or part time for pay on the congregation's website, and some served as volunteers who saw their involvement with the website as service to the congregation. Most of the website producers talked about two major audiences for the websites: potential visitors who wanted to learn about the congregation and members who sought calendar

information or wanted to listen to a sermon they missed. The websites were designed and maintained with these two groups in mind. Several of the site producers also talked about a third audience, people looking for resources for their own congregation. The individuals interviewed were enthusiastic about their congregational websites, and most of them expressed a conviction that websites are a significant marketing and visibility tool for congregations. Because of the significant background in advertising and marketing of most of the website producers, and because websites draw on the advertising genre, I now turn to a discussion of advertising and its relationship to websites.

Advertising and Marketing

The full-time website producer at a megachurch said, “The website’s purpose is promotion and information.” He used the words “promotion” and “promote” frequently in the interview. Myers (1999) uses the term “promotional culture” to describe the extension of the rhetoric of advertising and the commodity market to many new areas of everyday life, including education, government and religion (see also Fairclough, 1989; van Leeuwen, 2005). The interviews confirm this extension of advertising to religion; several interviewees talked about connections between secular advertising and church website production. The full-time website producer at a megachurch described the difference between secular advertising and a church website as residing in the content. He said secular advertising was not as “clean” in its content; he seemed to be referring to the fact that congregations don’t use sex or alcohol to sell. A megachurch website producer who works 30 hours per week for the church echoed this viewpoint. He said that websites were inherently value neutral and it was website producers who brought values to the sites. He said, “If you have a right walk with God and you bring that to it,” then what one does on the website should be okay. He said that if congregations used pornography to entice people to come and visit, that would be wrong. But, he affirmed, “The internet and technology is [sic] a tool, so it depends what you do with it.” One of the other megachurch website producers viewed her work

as simply fulfilling a task: “I pretty much promote whatever it is and make it accessible for the people who see it.”

The woman who headed up a communication team at a megachurch talked at length about the way she viewed the website. She said, “We feel the internet is key in marketing to this generation. . . . The internet is just where everybody’s going. Every business is on the internet and the church needs to be there.” She noted that because all four of her team members were trained in advertising, they worked together well to create advertising campaigns for the various events of the church, using a variety of media. She noted that they frequently created images for print publications and for the video projection screen used in Sunday worship and then later adapted those images for use on the website, trying to “focus on whatever is the major look and hook for those campaigns. We try to tailor it to what will grab people’s attention.” When they designed the website, they created a different header for each ministry page: “We generated all of them so they would look alike and be catchy.” She described the congregation’s major ministry goal as attracting people who didn’t attend church and who found plenty of interesting things to do on weekends. Website visitors “need to see that we are cool enough to compete with the other stuff that’s out there. . . . What’s going to get them in the door is something that’s right up there with the cool look that’s in other media. . . . We have to be able to compete with the secular market.”

These same ideas about promotion of church events and the value-neutral characteristic of websites were expressed in the interviews with emergent church website producers. “The internet is a tool. It can be much more than just having a website that says if you want to contact us here we are,” one of these said. Another said, “The web lends credibility to us. . . . The church needs to be relevant. It would make us obsolete if we didn’t use the web. And we do try to engage culture as much as possible.” He went on to describe his congregation’s coffee shop and their online congregational marketplace, structured like Craig’s List, as ways they try as a congregation to engage the culture and simultaneously build community. The third emergent church website producer said, in talking about how she writes verbal text for

the website, “I try to think of the site visitors as customers – how will this sound to them?”

The vibrant liberal/mainline website producers expressed similar ideas. One of them reflected, “Our website is our number one public visibility vehicle.” Another website producer at a vibrant liberal/mainline congregation noted that from childhood, Americans watch Sesame Street, which sets an expectation of sophistication in communication, and “We don’t feel comfortable if those standards aren’t met.” She expressed a commitment to creating websites that communicate a sense of place to give people a preview of what they might experience when they walk into a church; she viewed these websites as a way of helping people feel comfortable, akin to cleaning the pews. She said that some advertisements and some websites might be manipulative in some ways, but that it would be a mistake not to have a website. “It’s like saying we’re not going to install telephones because people say awful things over the phone,” she said. It would be wrong to sell oneself in an inauthentic way on a site, but that by using websites strategically, “We are using the best of the culture.”

Advertisements play a significant role in the “semiotization” of life, the privileging of words, images and design over substance (Aiello & Thurlow, 2006). In addition, advertisements play a part in the trend toward symbolic production as constitutive of social action rather than representative of it. Advertisements do these two things by making associations of meanings with commodities (Myers, 1994), and often these connections are hidden and seem natural. Ads achieve these associations in part through synthetic personalization (Fairclough, 1989), a casual, personalized style that appears to address the viewer as an individual (see also Cameron, 2000). This informal and personal form of address gives a sense of individually tailored service with the promise of individual choice (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2006). Several of the website producers argued that because the content of church websites is different than secular ads, the pitfalls of advertising are largely avoided. Scholars who study advertisements would disagree, arguing that a significant part of the power of advertising lies in its intertextual nature (Myers, 1994). Ads are “parasitic” (Cook,

2001, p. 33), reminding viewers of other advertisements they have seen, even if viewers are unaware of this phenomenon. These scholars would argue that a photo on a church website of a person looking right at the viewer, accompanied by personalized language using "you" and imperative verbs, connects viewers with past advertisements they have seen and puts viewers in the position of consumers, people who are shopping for commodities.

Only one of the ten website producers expressed the concern that simply by creating highly visual websites that draw on the advertising genre, congregations may violate the purpose of a congregational website and become too connected to our consumer culture. She viewed focusing on the spoken word, in the form of audio and video sermons, as the central purpose of congregational sites. She seemed to have some understanding of the power of the website medium to draw the viewer into the position of consumer of commodity. "We do not use a lot of images. We use very few [photos] of people. We don't perceive ourselves as being flashy. We want you to concentrate on the message. . . . We want [viewers] to get interested in what we say and then go further into the website." This producer alone seemed to understand the way that components of advertising have become naturalized on websites, and she wanted to resist that tendency by enabling website viewers to focus on verbal content, particular spoken words. In addition, she made a noteworthy comparison between church and her other website clients. "A church website is unlike most brick and mortar commercial clients. A church website is based on events as opposed to products. Events have a short lived beginning and end date. Even a sermon is based on an event." Her contrast between events and products indeed does reveal one different between commercial websites and church sites. However, churches do more than offer events; they also provide services for the people who come, as well as opportunities for community and ways to engage in service to others. The services that churches provide could be considered commodities, but they could also be considered gifts given by the congregations to the people who need them.

The interviews were striking in that so few of the website producers expressed any concerns about the nature of websites as a part of the consumer culture, with the propensity to turn church life into a commodity. The acceptance of photos and words with the purpose of promotion has been naturalized to an extent that it seems like common sense; it was obvious to these website producers that churches need to have websites that use the most contemporary communication strategies. Only one vibrant liberal/mainline website producer reflected a sense of the intertextual nature of advertisements; she was concerned that too many photos would make the congregation seem "flashy." None of the website producers hinted, in their own words, of the process of synthetic personalization in verbal or visual events. Two of them talked about trying to reflect the voice of the pastor as they wrote text for the website and others talked about trying to make the text accessible, but only one exhibited consciousness of the dangers inherent in making texts seem so personal and individualized that the church became one more commodity.

Thurlow and Jaworkski (2006) note three aspects of discourse that contribute to making it ideological: discourse can constitute identities and relationships, it can represent and reproduce systems of belief and power, and it can establish structures of inequality. The first of these, constituting identities and relationships, is clearly visible on congregational websites. The photos and graphics, associated with verbal text to "promote" various aspects of church life, suggests a personal relationship between the congregation and the website viewer which encourages the viewer to adopt an identity as consumer of a commodity. The viewer is invited into a synthetically personalized relationship promising, often by using photos and graphics, that options are available and that life will be enhanced by pursuing those options. Secondly, the websites represent and reproduce systems of belief through their photos of smiling families and groups of people engaged in worship and their statements of what it means to be a Christian. Most of the photos of individuals and groups on congregational websites portray attractive, middle-class people. In the same way that advertisements encourage the viewer to believe that something about the attractiveness of the person pictured in

the advertisement will transfer to the viewer when he or she purchases the object in the ad, the photos on congregational websites encourage the viewer to believe that some part of the attractiveness of the people pictured on the websites will transfer to the viewer by participating in this congregation. This represents and reproduces systems of belief, not the beliefs about God and the Christian faith that the congregation consciously sets out to affirm, but deeply held cultural beliefs about what constitutes being acceptable and attractive and how to gain those characteristics.

Do these strategies play a part in reproducing systems of power and structures of inequality? The website producers almost certainly would answer, "No." Their hopes and intentions for the websites are optimistic and positive, and many of them expressed their commitment to Christian ministry through the medium of creating or maintaining websites. Several talked about their desire to accurately reflect the nature of the congregation on the websites. The people pictured on the websites appear to be healthy, happy, middle or upper class people, and the only photos of people who appear to be in lower social classes show up in the context of the congregations' service ministries to the poor. Edelman (1984) discusses the language used by the "helping professions" and the way it justifies a power hierarchy (see also Piven & Cloward, 1971). The photos on websites of middle class people participating in congregational life and engaging in service ministry to lower class people arguably justifies the same kind of power hierarchy that Edelman observed. These patterns of social life probably appear natural and normal to many website viewers, and only careful consideration of the photos on the websites raises questions about the societal values that are being reinforced through the visual discourse on the websites.

Further, congregational websites encourage "window shopping." In the same ways that stores display their wares in shop windows, churches promote their pursuits in electronic windows. "Join us for worship!" these electronic windows seem to say or even shout. "Participate in our activities!" and "Embrace our values!" The website producers want to create sites that accurately reflect the identity of the congregation so people will know what to expect when they come to visit. They seem largely unaware

that their ability to accurately reflect the congregation is compromised by their engagement with advertisement media. The intertextual, "parasitic" nature of ads (Cook, 2001, p. 33) means that the use of photos, graphics and vocabulary in ways that resemble advertisements carries associations of consumption, and these associations compromise the very values the congregation desires to promote. It is noteworthy that the megachurches, which use the advertising medium most effectively on their websites, do not mention the common Biblical value "justice" in their verbal text. Consumers don't have time to care about justice. They care about the maintenance of societal patterns that ensure their continued ability to consume (*PR Newswire*, 2007; Samad, 2006). At the same time, it is also important to note that this commodification of religious life that can be seen in the way websites draw on the advertising medium is not unique to congregations or to religion. Education, government, medicine, and other areas of life have also become increasingly commodified in recent years (Myers, 1999; Fairclough, 1989). In this respect, communities of faith have shared in a broader cultural trend in which relationships increasingly are treated as transactions. With this as an ideological backup, I now turn to a presentation of the way the website producers talked about the resources used on the sites.

Semiotic Resources

The Homepage: A Clean and Attractive Lobby

One of the megachurch staff members called the homepage a "virtual front door" that conveyed the congregation's identity and provided links to information about the ministries of the church and contact persons. Another megachurch staff member said, "Our homepage is the introduction, the welcome." The marketing professional who maintained the website for a vibrant liberal/mainline congregation said that the way a church appears on the web, particularly on the homepage, gives a first impression to many people. "It's like cleaning up your lobby," she said, a comment that provided a potential answer to church members who might object to time, money, and effort spent on website design. She designed the site for her own

congregation and then later designed sites for several other congregations. When designing a site for a congregation, she said she looks at the church building, particularly the colors and styles used, and tries to use those same colors and styles on the congregation's home page so that visitors feel comfortable when they attend a worship service. The homepage, she hoped, represented in words, color, and style the unique characteristics of the congregation: "My homepages don't try to convert people, yet it is marketing-driven, trying to present who we are." She said she wants homepages to help people feel welcomed and to communicate warmth, so people can get over any fears. She reflected that there are so many churches, that when homepages accurately reflect the church, they make it possible for people to find a place where they feel comfortable.

An emergent church website producer echoed the same concern for accuracy in representation on the website, as did one of the megachurch website producers, who said, "We're a very laid-back church and we wanted to convey that. We're relaxed, casual, wear your jeans, bring a cup of coffee, with very upbeat music, user friendly, relevant sermons. We want people to be comfortable and at home when they come here, so we want the website to convey who we are." This concern for accuracy obscures the possibility that the presentation of the congregation on the website might play a part in shaping who the congregation is. In recent years communication scholars have focused on the significance of discourse in constructing rather than mirroring reality. For example, Creim (2005) emphasizes the importance of "narrative constructions" in organizations, which can persuade others to adopt viewpoints or to act in certain ways, legitimate group activities and outcomes, create a sense of group distinctiveness, provide norms for behavior, facilitate change by bridging the familiar and the unfamiliar, and establish images of consistency between past, present and future. The website producers did not express any awareness that their communication choices may shape the organization rather than solely reflect it.

Photos and Graphics: Speaking Without Words

One of the megachurch website producers talked about the fact that the site he maintained used numerous photos of people. “People like seeing people,” he said. He used stock photos of people that he found in various places on the web. For him, the reason to use photos of people was to give “a community feel.” In contrast, one of the emergent website designers used no photos of people in his design of a church site. He said the church leaders felt that a congregation can come across in a certain way because of the people they show on their websites, and these leaders didn’t want pictures to represent them or limit the way people perceived them. Instead, they sought to keep their website abstract so people could read the content and draw their own conclusions. The website designer did include photos on the site, though. One of the pages had a large photo at the top of an expanse of water with a bridge crossing the water, going far into the distance. The designer said that the bridge could represent different things to different people, perhaps a journey for one person or the fact that this congregation crosses great distances in their ministry. He said, “I picked pictures for the site not just because they are pretty but because they have a feeling to them, they make a person think for a few minutes.” The minister of the same congregation said that one of their strengths is a commitment to the arts, which was reflected on their homepage. “We try to post things that will artistically convey something but that do not appear canned. We chose icons or images that convey something about whatever the activity is about that we are promoting.”

The woman who worked in marketing and designed and maintained a vibrant liberal/mainline website talked about a photo of a flower at the top left side of the site. To her, photos of beautiful scenes in nature can communicate Christian values. She said she wanted people to know “there is a place to go for hope and redemption” and she believed photos can convey that message. Because of her background in marketing, she said she can identify high quality photos to use on the site. This presents an interesting contrast. Her background in the advertising medium gave her the skills to identify the kind of photographs that communicate effectively, and she uses that skill to

try to communicate Christian values through visual resources. Her words illustrate another interesting aspect of these interviews. The website producers use images on their websites for many reasons. They are themselves producing a visual object, an assemblage of verbal text and visual resources; the websites they produce could be considered to be a work of art in themselves. They are borrowing, consciously and unconsciously, from hegemonic advertising patterns, but they are doing so much more. Without theological training, they are engaging in theological reflection about their congregations, working deeply and sincerely to try to represent what they consider to be the spiritual depth of their congregations. They are trying to create something attractive, something that will reflect the aspects of the congregation's life that will attract people.

The megachurch website designer who worked full time for the congregation said his goal when adding anything – verbal or visual content – was to make the website "visually pleasing to the eye." He added, "If you want people to visit your site, it has to be visually pleasing. If you're going to stick your money in anything, it's graphics. That's what people see, it's the first impression." In contrast, the website designer who maintained one of the vibrant liberal/mainline sites said they didn't use a lot of images and very few photos of people because "we don't perceive ourselves as being flashy. We want to concentrate on the message. We want website viewers to get interested in what we say and then go further into the website." The use of images on websites is one of the major connections with advertising, and images evoke many associations. All the website producers discussed the intentional choices they made regarding images and their desire to reflect the nature of the congregation and to help viewers feel comfortable or be prompted to think. None of them expressed any concern that the use of images might shape the congregation by constructing reality rather than reflecting it.

Machin (2004) addresses the increasing use of stock photographs in a wide variety of forms of communication, caused by an increased availability of images through online sources such as Getty Images (see also Aiello and Thurlow, 2006).

Machin describes a shift “from emphasis on photography as witness to photography as a symbolic system” (p. 317), a shift that is manifested by an increasing use of decontextualized images with no or little background that represent types rather than specific individuals. These images are sorted in image banks under headings that refer to mental states and core values, so they “symbolically represent marketable concepts and moods such as ‘contentment’ and ‘freedom.’ . . . This is therefore an ideologically pre-structured world which is in harmony with consumerism” (p. 316). The comments by website producers indicate that they are well aware of the ability of images to convey moods and values and to engage the viewer: “they make a person think for a few minutes” and “there is a place to go for hope and redemption.” Yet only one of the site producers felt uneasy about the possibility that the way images are used in contemporary culture may connect with viewer with an ideology that is in harmony with values that the church may not want to embrace, namely consumerism.

Audio, Video, and Online Community

Several of the producers talked about the importance of using websites to do what other forms of communication, such as newsletters, cannot do. The vibrant liberal/mainline website designer who used very few images and photos viewed the video and audio of the sermon as the heart of the website; indeed, on her website, the video of the sermon was right on the homepage. A megachurch website producer echoed the same commitment and noted that 50% of the traffic on their website came to listen to sermons. Another vibrant liberal/mainline website designer created a video tour of the church building, noting that websites offer an opportunity to liven up photos. The video tour used pans of still photos to create a sense of movement. An emergent church website designer, who had designed sites for several churches, talked about the significance of using websites for online discussion, something that no other means of communication can facilitate. He said, “Churches are really seizing the internet as a place to meet and congregate. The church can be a lot bigger than their location. It’s exciting to see they have that kind of vision.” Audio, video and online discussion are features that websites can offer, and these features are not available in

printed media. The congregations in this study used their websites for many activities that are not available in printed media: registering for events, giving money, signing up for email newsletters and weekly emails from pastors, accessing databases of staff and congregation members, and links to staff members' email. The website producers were conscious of these opportunities, with producers emphasizing different opportunities presented by the medium.

Verbal Text: Varied Philosophies

Many talked about the relationship between the website and the printed publications of the church. In this area, the interviews confirmed the patterns noted in chapters four and five. The megachurch website producers modified material from other church publications before putting it on the websites. One said that "the words often have to be edited" when taking text from weekly bulletins to put on the website. Another said he takes material from weekly bulletins, cleans it up, shortens it, makes it visually pleasing, and adds graphics. A third megachurch website producer described her process of creating webpages for the various ministries of the congregation. First, the ministry departments of the church supplied her with brochures about their programs. She then talked with them, asking questions about the program, and thereafter created webpages from the brochure, drawing on the priorities discussed in a conversation, and sent it to them for review. She said she changed items from the brochure "to make their material accessible" for website viewers: "I pretty much promote whatever it is and make it accessible for the people who see it." The megachurch site producers frequently expressed their awareness that the website medium requires a different strategy regarding verbal text than print media.

The comments of two of the vibrant liberal/mainline website producers suggested a closer relationship between the congregation's printed material and its website. One posts PDF files of the congregation's newsletters. This strategy is less time consuming than editing all the material for the web, but she acknowledged that there is a problem because newsletters often have many names of individuals, especially children, which may not be appropriate for a website. Another vibrant/liberal

mainline website producer said the publicity committee at the church wanted a similar look across all church publications, including the website. She said that textual content for the website was derived from printed church publications that were developed by the pastoral staff or committees with pastoral staff review. “All information starts out in printed form. The web version is just a copy using a different delivery method.” She added, “A lot of churches are making a big mistake trying to be a cnn.com on their website. They’re losing the main point of a church website. It’s not to be commercial. It’s to focus on the spoken word.” This was the congregation that had a video of the weekly sermon on the homepage, indicating her commitment to focus on the spoken word.

One of the emergent church website producers reflected on the way announcements are worded on the website. She said they didn’t have a list of criteria for making decisions about how to word things, but she did try to consider how the senior pastor would explain things. She tried not to use Christian jargon, and asked herself whether an announcement sounded similar to a typical person on the street. She said that congregational leaders wanted to communicate their church was a place of relationships and that they cared about people’s stories: “Wherever you came from, wherever you are right now, we accept you.” She also said that congregation leaders were intentional in moving away from forms of communication on paper. They had been trying to encourage congregation members to rely on the website rather than on printed information because of the environmental benefit in reducing use of paper. The emergent church website producers were more likely to create written text for the website without beginning with printed text. They were also more likely to see written text in the context of various forms of online engagement such as discussion groups, their own version of Craig’s List, and personal stories by congregation members.

Differences and Similarities

The interviews revealed different strategies in the ways resources are used on the websites, variations that parallel the data presented in chapters four and five. In the area of verbal text, megachurch website producers were most intent on reshaping

written material for the web to make it “accessible” to viewers, and they had the time and resources to do it. Vibrant liberal/mainline website producers were the most tied to printed written material, while the emergent church website producers spoke hardly at all about printed material and appeared to be moving most rapidly to electronic media as their primary means of communication. Numerous similarities in strategy across the three kinds of churches could also be seen in the interviews. With the exception of one vibrant liberal/mainline website designer, who viewed the extensive use of photos as “flashy” and felt photos detracted from the spoken word on the website, the nine other website producers stressed the significance of the visual components. One megachurch website producer emphasized the importance of photos of people to communicate a “community feel,” while two others, one from a vibrant liberal/mainline church and one from an emergent church, saw photos as a way to communicate values and to make people think. Many noted that updating photos and graphics took significant time, and yet they felt the need to make their sites visually pleasing in order to attract people to the site. With one exception, they seemed unaware of the potential of generic images to connect the viewer with the consumer culture. Many talked about the unique opportunities that websites provide: audio, video and online discussion are now possible in ways that weren’t in the past.

However, one of the most remarkable similarities in the interviews was the lack of any reservations about the possibility of accurately representing congregations on websites. While none of the interviewees used the term “objectivity,” they drew on values that have been embraced by journalists in the United States since the 1920s. Schudson (2001) asserts that objectivity as a norm in journalism is peculiarly American and was articulated by journalists in the twentieth century as a way to differentiate journalism from propaganda (see also Wien, 2005; Morris, 2002; Cooper, 1994; for the parallel movement in science see Daston & Galison, 1982). In other countries, journalism as commentary and opinion has been more readily embraced. Because of this influential journalistic emphasis in the United States, Americans may be uniquely poised to believe that accuracy in media presentations is easily attainable and

obviously desirable. It is noteworthy that the congregational websites in this study were produced by such a small number of people in each congregation, and that those people did not appear to be aware that discourse can construct reality as well as represent it. Many of them expressed their intention to accurately reflect the nature of the congregation and none of them questioned their ability to do it.

The Discourse of Online Community

I shift now to a discussion of the unique characteristics of computer-mediated communication that will provide further backdrop for the interviews. Many early researchers, in the 1980s and early 1990s, believed computer-mediated communication was a "cool" medium best suited to the transfer of information and data, but not appropriate for social uses because of the absence of social cues (Herring, 2001; Hine, 2000; Hine, 2005). Because geographic location, social class, race, ethnicity, age and gender are often invisible or considered invisible online, others saw CMC as a utopian, egalitarian harbinger of a new form of democracy which would enable people to relate to each other based on ideas rather than prejudices (Dean, 2000). At this point in the development and study of CMC – the 1980s and early 1990s – very few religious leaders had any interest in the subject. Email was viewed primarily as a means of information exchange for academics, and the development of online discussion groups and their potential for creating religious community was largely invisible to religious leaders.

"Stickiness" and Online Relationships

Hine (2005) notes that a second phase of CMC research began to claim the internet as a cultural context. The term "virtual community" became commonplace in part because of a 1993 book by Rheingold. The scholarly literature in the 1990s about online groups tended to focus on autobiographical accounts of life online or arguments about whether community online is real or in danger of affecting offline communities (Baym, 2000). A key event was the 1997 Supreme Court decision overturning the Communications Decency Act, which precipitated a third phase of the development of

CMC. Now computer-mediated interaction could grow into commercial ventures, and community came to be viewed as a way to increase the "stickiness" of websites. "Community, in other words, could be converted into capital" (Dean, 2000, p. 14). It is ironic that religious organizations began to become interested in the potential benefits offered by the web at roughly the same time that websites were given legal permission to become commercial ventures. Thus, commerce and commodification were beginning to rise in significance in website design and philosophy as churches were beginning to explore what websites could contribute to congregational ministry. Issues of "stickiness" related to advertising and selling may have influenced church website design from the earliest days.

The question of the relationship between online and offline communication is deeply serious to those who study CMC in religious settings. Religious pollster George Barna noted in 1998 that the challenge facing Christian leaders was not how to stop new forms of electronic church, but to ensure that new forms remain tied to foundational theology and principles (cited in Campbell, 2003a). Christians have been divided in their view of electronic spirituality, with some seeing the web as a place of opportunity for the church, a place where proclamation and explanation can take place, an effective means of evangelization of the world. Others view the internet as a dehumanizing force, a threat to community and communication, a modern day Tower of Babel where humans are their own gods (Bazin and Cottin, 2003). Campbell (2003a; see also Campbell, 2005) uses the term "critical friends" (p. 216) to describe the school of thinking that advocates careful reflection about online religious community as the appropriate approach, embracing technology with caution and discernment. This ambivalence about the place of CMC in Christian life was not visible in the opinions of the website producers interviewed for this study. They all believed strongly that websites offer a positive opportunity for congregations. The "critical friend" model advocated by Campbell seemed absent in the churches represented by the interviews – the website producers were enthusiastic friends, and they didn't describe any input

from or interactions with people who gave them any critical perspectives on the website medium.

Several website producers mentioned that their senior pastors, or the other pastors at the church, participated enthusiastically in creating printed material about the church's ministries, but didn't spend any effort considering how to describe the church's ministries on the website. One vibrant liberal/mainline website producer reflected about her church's pastors, "Their whole life is in print. That's all they know as a church." One of the megachurch interviewees noted that the senior pastor did not even have a computer. One of the vibrant liberal/mainline website producers mentioned that her senior pastor had begun to show enthusiasm for the website for two reasons. First, the sermons were archived on the site, which allowed him to retrieve old sermons easily. Secondly, at new members' classes he had begun to notice that an increasing number of people mentioned they found the church through the website. Another website producer said that the senior pastor was gaining enthusiasm for the website because it seemed to be attracting new people to the church. This functional approach to communication strategies seems to be common throughout Christian history. If a communication strategy works to attract new people, then it must be a good idea.

Facilitating Connections

Campbell (2003b) uses another term, "spiritual networking" (p. 192), to look at the ways relationships in online religious settings are knit together in social-spiritual dimensions. Campbell's (2003b, 2005) research indicates that the increase of online religious communication is not causing people to abandon their places of worship. Most people she interviewed saw online connections as supplemental to their involvement in their local church, filling in gaps in teaching, ministry, and community experience. One member described his/her online community as a companion parish, and another participant said that online religious communications had been valuable for her self-esteem because she was able to interact around her ideas without her clothes or mannerisms making a difference. Campbell also found that people join online communities most often to make up for relationships that are lacking in the offline

church (see also Larsen, 2004). Because religious leaders have been slow to embrace CMC, most of the online religious communities Campbell studied were entirely separate from congregations. In the few years since she collected her data, congregations, particularly emergent congregations, have begun to view web-based forums, discussion groups and bulletin boards as a welcome supplement to face-to-face congregational life.

The emergent church website producers expressed their awareness of the challenges of creating online opportunities to complement face-to-face interaction. The woman who works in an emergent church in several roles including website design, talked about the fact that congregational leaders frequently discussed issues related to community, but seldom addressed the ways that online communication could contribute. Her congregation's website appeared to have significant opportunities for online connections, but she saw those opportunities as quite limited: a place to sign up for an email list and electronic newsletters with talking points about the sermon and a way to send email questions. The website designer for the other emergent church noted that the website offers member log in, online forms to sign up for events and be notified of events, and an online discussion forum for members to post and non-members to see. The pastor of that congregation reflected on the fact that online community requires an adoption period. He said that online prayer requests were not commonly used by people in his congregation, but that he gets prayer requests from around the world because of the website. Some forms of online communication were readily adopted in his congregation, such as the marketplace modeled on Craig's List, which was heavily used almost from the start by congregation members, which may reflect the comfort many Americans experience engaging in commercial transactions. That congregation's website was set up with the ability to comment on upcoming events and to continue discussion from sermons and small groups, and congregation members were slowly engaging with these forms of online community. These comments about the slow adoption period for forms of online interaction raise the possibility that the numerous emergent churches that feature polls, chat and forums on

their websites may be aiming for the appearance of dialogicality as a rhetorical move. They may desire to encourage website viewers to perceive their congregations as welcoming to diverse voices, whether or not website visitors actually engage very significantly with these options. Indeed, the technological features of the internet facilitate such a rhetorical move.

As shown in the previous two chapters, the megachurches were highly skilled at enabling people to engage with the ministry of the church through their website. Links on the websites provided information and contacts for a multitude of opportunities for connection, such as support groups, Bible studies, classes, and service opportunities. In describing the content on the homepage, the megachurch website producer who works 30 hours per week for the congregation said that the priority was to present the activities for the major groups within the church, such as the men, women, children, and high school students. The full-time megachurch website producer said that the events to which the website extends an invitation are "fellowship based," which enable people to get help and support. For the megachurch website producers, the concept of community was centered in face-to-face interactions among church members and attenders. The purpose of the website was to promote activities that would get people in the door so they could meet others and receive from them and from God what they need. The woman who headed up a communications team at a megachurch said they typically put announcements on their homepage that relate the church community as whole and that will serve a large number of people. She saw her work as her form of ministry, and she expressed her dependence on others in her church to do other parts of the ministry: "I feel absolutely convinced that advertising is my form of witnessing. I can provide a tool to help them want to come to church and others who are more knowledgeable can tell them about Christ. Once they're in the door, God takes care of the rest." This noteworthy statement reveals an integration of a core value and practice of the Christian faith – witnessing – with a core strategy of the capitalistic economic system – advertising. The casual integration of these two practices, based in two such

different belief systems, creates one of the significant challenges for the church today (Barger, 2005).

In contrast with the megachurches, the vibrant liberal/mainline website producers were more likely to talk about community as residing both in the congregation and in the neighborhood around the church. One of the vibrant liberal/mainline interviewees said, “We try to balance on the site a concern for internal community and outside service to the community around us.” A website producer from another vibrant liberal/mainline congregation noted that there was a large organ installed in a nearby church. Some of the people from her church were involved in helping to install it, so she created a photo journal of the organ installation for her congregation’s website. In addition, her pastor asked her to put links on the homepage to the local art museum and nearby school. She reflected, “We are good neighbors. We try to be good community citizens doing the right thing.” She expressed her concern, though, about the possibility that online relationships may replace face-to-face interactions. She wondered if that’s the direction the church is heading, and she said, “In no way do I think a website can replace a congregation.” Despite her reservations, she expressed her commitment to websites as a way to nurture congregational life. She said a website can help someone who is homebound to keep them connected to the congregation and connected to God. She said, “A church should have a web ministry. I would love if someone was in pain and could contact someone online. Our technology has created isolation. Our youth have their own section of the website and they can talk to each other on it. They have set up a blog site.” Even in these comments, however, she was concerned about the possibility that a congregation’s online community might stray onto topics that have nothing to do with Christianity. She said, “That raises a whole set of other questions – how can we limit our discussions to things of faith?”

The concept of community was used by website producers in all three types of churches as a semiotic resource, and they used this concept somewhat differently. On the megachurch sites, the community was the congregation, and the job of website producers was to create advertising campaigns to get people through the door so they

would be able to find the relationships they needed. Online opportunities for connection in the megachurches usually involved signups for email newsletters or weekly emails from pastors. In the vibrant liberal/mainline churches, the community resided both in the congregation and the neighborhood, and the website producers wanted to create sites that would help people to engage in both. These websites tended to present a positive view, in pictures and in words, of engagement with both the congregation's activities and activities in the surrounding area. In the emergent churches, the notion of community resided in relationships that might be face-to-face or might be online. The three types of congregations described their goals related to community differently, and those differences were apparent both in the content analysis and in the interviews.

In spite of the differences in the way the concept of community was described by the three kinds of churches, the concept functioned in a similar way on all three kinds of websites, as a discursive appeal, drawing on deeply held archetypal ideas about personal connections and human relationships. Thurlow, Lengel, & Tomic (2004) point out the fact that different people bring significantly different expectations to the concept of community; these associations of "community" with various forms of human relationships probably come from a variety of previous experiences. On all the websites, "community" was used positively, as if it is self-evident that community is something good and helpful that should be sought after. Even the emergent church websites, which discussed community in the theological context of the nature of God, gave very few definitions or specific indications of the presuppositions they are bringing to their discussion of community. In that way "community" is like "family," an "ultimate term" (Weaver, 1953), used to invoke something that is assumed to be positive and good. All three kinds of congregational websites used "community" in this way, to some extent at least. While the megachurches were most likely to make reference to "family" to appeal to archetypal notions of good relationships, the emergent churches were most likely to use "community" to accomplish the same end.

Conclusion: More Portraits

This chapter centered around critical textual analysis, drawing on the theories of semiotics and social semiotics. The patterns that emerged through content analysis and rhetorical analysis were considered again, with the addition of data from the interviews. The goal was to consider the links between the semiotic strategies used and the political-cultural economy of the congregations studied, including the power relations which frame the practices of congregational branding. This analysis resulted in further portraits of the congregations. In chapter four I used the metaphor of lenses to describe the way the congregations presented themselves: the megachurches as mirrors, the vibrant liberal/mainline congregations as windows, and the emergent churches as cameras. In chapter five, I presented portraits of the three kinds of congregations. The megachurches present themselves on their websites as busy, active families; the vibrant liberal/mainline congregations as nurturant parents; and the emergent churches as trendy coffeehouses. After undertaking the interviews with website producers, those portraits remain, but additional portraits have become clear to me. This new set of portraits draws on images of enterprise and consumption and comes from an understanding of websites as participating in the advertising genre. In this set of portraits, all three churches find their place at a mall.

The megachurches take the form on their websites of a large anchor store, such as a department store or a Wal-Mart. They offer something for everyone. It appears that almost every desire and need can be met because so many options are available. These options are presented on the websites using synthetic personalization, which makes the viewer feel that he or she has been addressed in a personal way. Perhaps unintentionally, the viewer is treated like a consumer of the variety of goods in the store. The success of the megachurches in attracting members is not surprising if their websites have similarities to a Wal-Mart store. A Pew Center study (2005) found that 84% of Americans had shopped at a Wal-Mart store in the previous year and half of these said they had done so regularly. Solid majorities felt that Wal-Mart was a good place for their family to shop and was good for their community and the country. The

megachurches reflect the consumer culture, and consumption is viewed by many Americans as a good thing for all.

The emergent churches, in contrast, present themselves as art galleries. Through their emphasis on authentic community and deep theological reflection, they encourage the viewer to make an investment in a major purchase, something that will reflect the viewer's identity and that will endure longer than the shoes, kitchen utensils or shampoo purchased at Wal-Mart. These art galleries aren't cluttered with small items, and there are not as many displays to encourage last-minute impulse shopping. The kind of consumption encouraged here is intentional, with reflection on personal authenticity, artistic excellence, and culturally diverse creativity. A purchase at this art gallery will have relational implications because connections will be established with the curator of the gallery and with others who value the kind of art displayed here. The curators would shudder at the idea that the gallery has anything in common with a Wal-Mart store, because they consider shopping for art to be a deep, thoughtful, and humanizing endeavor. However, all shopping is nonetheless a form of consumption, and both the Wal-Mart and the gallery use sophisticated advertisements to get people through their doors. Despite its great differences from Wal-Mart, this gallery still finds its place at the local mall.[120]

In another contrast, the vibrant liberal/mainline congregations appear on their websites as protest marches or peace rallies. These rallies are being held on the sidewalk outside the mall, but the protest organizers direct people to a small counter-cultural shop inside the mall where they can purchase peace banners, justice buttons, and environmental bumper stickers. In addition, some enterprising folks have set up a stand near the rally site to sell those same items. The organizers of the rally are recruiting people to join in and add their voices to the fight for inclusive values, and they have used a series of advertisements to get people to attend the rally. The focus of the advertisements and the rally is on finding one's voice and adding that voice to the

[120] I am indebted to Satina Smith in a personal conversation for the idea of portraying megachurches as department stores and emergent churches as art galleries.

cause of promoting peace, justice, and ecological sustainability. In the same way that the gallery owners refuse to acknowledge that their endeavor bears any relation to Wal-Mart's goals, the protest organizers would be aghast at the suggestion that they have anything in common with either the gallery or the big box store. They would say that they are not encouraging consumption at all; indeed, they are fighting it. Yet they are holding their rally at a mall, they are selling accoutrements of protest, and they are recruiting people for their cause with sophisticated advertisements.

These portraits affirm that congregational websites encourage consumption. Different segments of the American population may have positive or negative reactions to Wal-Marts, art galleries, or protest marches, and the comparison of the congregational websites to these three kinds of commercial activities are not intended to indicate that one of them is inherently better than another. At the same time, however, the comparisons *are* intended to highlight the congruent patterns of consumerism presented in the websites. By using the medium of advertising, they position the viewer to "buy" the wares offered by the congregation. They encourage congregations, and by extension the Christian faith itself, to be viewed as commodities, whether intentionally or not. Social semioticians argue that many forms of economic, social and political life have become semioticized, "dependent on symbolism, imagery and design" and engaged with "the promotion of ideals, images and lifestyle" (Aiello & Thurlow, 2006, p. 149; see also Lash & Urry, 1994). We have seen this pattern of semiotization on congregational websites. Symbolism, imagery and design are paramount in the considerations of nine of the ten website producers. Several of the website producers frequently used the word "promote" or related concepts when they discussed their purpose. "Ideals, images and lifestyle" are readily visible on the homepages, and often on the other web pages as well, for most of the congregations studied. The website producers were clear that their goal was to faithfully and accurately represent the congregation, and the ideals, images and lifestyles presented on the pages of the websites were chosen for the purpose of conveying an accurate

representation. Any form of manipulation would have been distasteful to them. Their sincerity and desire to serve with integrity were clear in the interviews.

Yet in most cases these website producers did their work of representing the congregation alone. Several of the site producers said that the pastor or pastors trusted them to make good decisions for the site. The hands-off attitude and lack of engagement of many senior pastors contributes to the problematic nature of the website as an accurate and objective representation of the congregation. Pastors may have been writing text for announcements or brochures, and that text may have been used on the site as a reflection of the priorities of the pastoral staff of the congregation. However, websites are so much more than verbal text. In fact, the verbal text is often the last aspect of a website to be absorbed by viewers. Photos, graphics, links, and the overall feel of the homepage are much more significant in communicating the identity of the congregation. The website designer who studied the colors and shapes of the church building and tried to mirror them on the homepage was attempting to engage visually with the reality of the congregation's identity, but the identity of a congregation resides in much more than the building. The question of accurate representation of the congregation on a website is complex and challenging, and the website producers seemed largely unaware of the complexity. The absence of "critical friends" may be part of the reason why website producers ignored the commodification and consumerism inherent in the application of the advertising medium to congregational websites, and why they were equally unaware of the possibility that discourse may create reality as well as represent it. They need to hear voices that help them think critically about the challenges of the electronic medium they embrace so enthusiastically.