Chapter Two

Conceptual Framework:
Organizations, Rhetoric of the Web, and Social Semiotics

Two key aspects of Christian congregational life are identity and persuasion. For the former, "Who are we and why does it matter?" are central questions for all organizations, including congregations. In the area of persuasion, Christian congregations have the additional biblical mandate to "preach the gospel" with the goal of persuading others of the significance of the Christian faith. Therefore the conceptual framework for this study draws on theory and research related to identity and persuasion. The object of analysis is congregational websites. Each of the three kinds of congregations discussed above – megachurches, emergent churches, and vibrant liberal churches – has a distinct theological and philosophical outlook that shapes their use of the web to reach into their communities and to keep their members informed, motivated, and connected. Comparing and contrasting the public voices of these types of churches, in particular their self-presentation on the web, provides important insights into Protestant Christian life in the United States in the first decade of the twenty-first century. With this in mind, several areas of scholarship serve as foundational concepts. First, social science research on organizational identity and community, both off and on the web, was examined to discern principles that can be applied to the study of representations of congregational identity. Rhetorical theory as applied to the web is the second foundational framing concept because of the long-standing focus on persuasion in rhetorical studies. Third, theories of semiotics and social semiotics were considered, because signs and symbols are used by individuals and communities both to present identity and exercise persuasion. Websites of congregations in the three groups of churches were examined using principles derived from these three areas of study, with the expectation of finding differences in the symbolic representation of organizational identity as well as in methods of persuasion.

Organizational Identity and Community

Organizational identity has been studied by marketers for several decades, but U.S. social scientists began to study the concept only a little more than twenty years ago. In the past decade, the amount of research on organizational identity has dramatically increased, driven in part by globalization, the instability of companies in a climate of mergers and buyouts, and the fact that corporations are establishing an identity on the web (Aust, 2004). Early definitions of organizational identity centered on aspects of an organization's character which are central, enduring and distinctive and give the organization specificity, stability, and coherence (Hatch and Schultz, 1997; Moingeon and Ramanantsoa, 1997). Organizational identity is grounded in an organization's history (Pratt and Foreman, 2000); it is shaped by the rites, myths and taboos of the organization (Moingeon and Ramanantsoa); it can be understood by studying an organization's values (Aust); and a multiplicity of voices within an organization can result in more than one version of an organization's identity being present (Creim, 2005; Pratt and Foreman). Hatch and Schultz (1997) argue that organizational culture is the internal symbolic context in which identity develops, with the latter defined as primarily textual, explicit, and instrumental. They define organizational culture as "the tacit organizational understandings (e.g. assumptions, beliefs, values) that contextualize efforts to make meaning, including self-definition" (Hatch and Shultz, 2002, p. 996).

With these assumptions, this study will draw on a definition of organizational identity proposed by Leuthesser and Kohli (1997): "the way in which an organization reveals its philosophy and strategy through communication, behavior and symbolism" (p. 59). This definition is grounded in the linguistic turn that has occurred in organizational studies (Creim, 2005) and has focused attention on the significance of discourse in constructing rather than mirroring reality. Creim, for example, emphasizes the importance of "narrative constructions" in organizations: they 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. In a similar way, concerns with organizational language in constructing identity and self-presentation have led to increased emphasis on frame analysis, the study of the ways frames of meaning and motive are created and mobilized through discourse (Martin, 2002; Tannen 1993). The fact that organizational narrative constructions and frames of meaning may be visual and behavioral as well as verbal is particularly relevant when considering websites. Everything an organization says, makes, and does contributes to its identity (Baker and Balmer, 1997), and its visual communication creates frames of meaning alongside its verbal narrative. Organizational identity presentation is closely related to self-presentation, a concept that has been studied by social scientists for several decades. Winter, Saunders, and Hart (2003) note that in the past the bulk of published research on impression management focused on self-presentation by individuals, but now "there is growing interest in organizational impressions and the symbols that convey information about a firm and provide insights into organizational behavior" (p. 310).

Mission statements in particular play a central role in presenting organizational identity. While some scholars (Hartzell, 2002) make a distinction between "vision statements" and "mission statements," many researchers use the latter term to include any kind of statement that presents an organization's purpose, direction, values, goals, strategies, or philosophy. Leuthesser and Kohli (1997; see also Pearce and David, 1987) classify aspects of mission statements into four categories of sub-statements: benefits, values (or norms), self-image (how the organization wishes to be perceived), and focus (scope of activity). In this study, "mission statement" will be used to refer to any statement with those components. A mission statement, according to the president of a U.S. non-profit, should cause the people involved in an organization to believe that something larger than life is possible because of their actions and focus. The president of another organization believes that mission statements "can endow employees and other stakeholders with an uplifting purpose that connects to their inner desire to contribute to something good, great, and lasting" (American Society of Association

Executives, 2004, p. 23). In short, analysis of mission statements needs to include both structured study of elements and components, but also the kinds of statements that create an uplifting and "larger than life" sense of focus and purpose. In turn, all of these are part of the verbal, visual, and behavioral forms of identity construction that are visible on organizational websites.

Because congregations so often call themselves "communities" and because congregational identity so often seems to be connected with a positive construction of the notion of community, the social science research on community is also relevant. Cherny (1999) lists multiple definitions of the concept of community, noting that there has been "an astounding lack of consensus in the social science literature about just what is meant by the word 'community'" (p. 248). Cherny cites a 1955 comparison of 94 different definitions of community; 69 have in common the ideas that social interaction, geographic area and common ties are usually found in community life. All but three of the 94 definitions stress social interaction as a necessary element of community life. Wellman (cited in Herring, 2004) identifies three characteristics of community: sociability, support and identity. Because this study focuses on websites, which increasingly provide opportunities for online connection such as online forums and blogs, the boundaries between face-to-face community and online community must be addressed. Cherny notes that if social interaction is a requirement for the existence of community, then interest-based online groups that interact regularly in newsgroups, mailing lists, or chat conform to the requirements for social interaction as well as common ties, even if they do not share geographic area. An extensive literature explores the issue of whether online community can truly be considered community,[8]

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[8] Regarding online communities, Dean (2000) quotes a definition by Reingold: "Virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (p. 5). Dean draws attention to three aspects of Reingold's definition: community is an emergent property, community on the web does not refer to physical communities that use computers to link to each other, and virtual communities are often made stronger by face-to-face connections. Reingold's definition is also helpful because it points out that the coincidence of like tastes or interests is not enough to earn the label community. Other researchers identify other characteristics that relate to online communities: a core of regular participants; shared history, purpose, culture, norms and values; solidarity and support; a means of conflict resolution; self awareness of the group as an entity distinct from other groups; and

and that literature is particularly relevant for the study of religious communities that meet only online. Most congregations do not encourage online community options as ends in themselves; instead their websites communicate the view that online forums and blogs are a supplement to face-to-face congregational life, providing enrichment and opportunities for continued dialogue.

Thurlow, Lengel, & Tomic (2004) make a distinction between descriptions of community that are "empirical," which describe the way community is, and "normative," which express what various people think community should be like (p. 108). They note that the concept of community is used in significantly different ways by different speakers and writers, and that experts as well as ordinary people have many different expectations about what community should be like. These expectations often form an unstated yet influential backdrop for discussions about community. In fact, the concept of community as used in the discourse of organizational identity is largely constructed from these often unstated expectations. This phenomenon is more significant in Christian settings than in many other settings, because there the concept of community functions like an "ultimate term" (Weaver, 1953) that draws on deeply held, archetypal notions of good and evil. Congregations often call themselves "communities of faith," and many diverse activities that take place in congregations are labeled as "community activities" or "opportunities to build community." The concept is almost never used in Christian settings to convey anything other than a positive construction of group relationships; it often seems to function as a discursive appeal to archetypal notions about how people should relate to one another and be connected. In this study, the websites were examined for the frequency of the use of "community" and related terms, as well as the ways the concept was discussed and presented. Much of the activity that takes under the umbrella of Christian communities has components of persuasion, and I turn now to a discussion of rhetoric, the study of persuasion.

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emergence of roles, hierarchy, governance, and rituals (Herring, 2004). In addition, Thurlow, Lengel, & Tomic (2004) give a helpful summary of these and other arguments about whether or not online community is "proper" community (p. 111).

The Rhetoric of the Web

In the fourth century BCE, Aristotle defined rhetoric as "an ability, in each case, to see the available means of persuasion" (1991, p. 36). In the ancient Greek and Roman worlds, the study of rhetoric focused almost entirely on persuasive speech in public settings, such as the courts and legislative bodies. In the fourth century CE, Augustine (1958) applied rhetoric to preaching, a form of public speaking but located in a new setting, the church, and with new goals, Christian conversion and Christian growth. In the Middle Ages, rhetoricians continued to study preaching but also expanded their focus of study to include written speech, particularly letters and literature (Murphy, 1974). The object of focus in rhetorical studies has continued to expand, and in the twentieth century rhetorical analysis was applied to such diverse forms of expression as architecture, public spaces, and all forms of mass media (Andrews, 1990; Leach, 2002). Principles of rhetoric can thus be used to analyze verbal texts that appear on congregational websites, such as mission statements, verbal invitations to get involved or purchase things, and other statements that exercise persuasion using words. Congregational websites increasingly offer audio-visual components, such as audio or video sermons (Larsen, 2001; Larsen, 2004). Spoken speech that has been recorded can be analyzed through the lens of rhetoric in much the same way as it has been for many centuries. Persuasion is also exercised through photographs, graphics, and other visual elements, and rhetorical analysis can be used to consider these visual components in much the same way as it might be used with newspapers, magazines, advertisements, and brochures. All the linguistic and visual resources on an organizational website can be evaluated to see, in Aristotle's words, "the available means of persuasion."

Persuasion on a website can come in the form of interactivity. Researchers emphasize that the web has discontinuity as well as continuity with previous forms of media, and one of the most significant attributes of digital media is its potential for interactivity (Bucy, 2004; Sohn & Lee, 2005; Stromer-Galley, 2000; Stromer-Galley &

Foot, 2002).[9] In his foundational work on interactivity, Rafaeli (1988) described the kind of interaction where people build on previous statements by other people. Stromer-Galley (2004) calls this "interactivity-as-process," and it can happen face to face or through digital technology such as email, instant messaging, and chat. The other form of interactivity, which she calls "interactivity-as-product" happens when a set of technological features allows users to interact with the interface or system itself, for example clicking on a hyperlink to download an audio presentation (p. 391). Massey and Levy (1999) identify these same two aspects of interactivity, using the terms "interpersonal interactivity" and "content interactivity" to distinguish them (p. 140). Interpersonal interactivity (interactivity-as-process) is facilitated on congregational websites through links to staff members' email addresses, discussion forums, and blogs that allow for dialog. Content interactivity (interactivity-as-product) is facilitated on congregational websites through site maps and search engines, as well as links to other pages within the websites and outside websites, links that allow downloads of audio or visual material, and links that allow viewers to sign up for activities or contribute money. Sundar (2004) notes, "[C]ertain forms or elements of interactive interfaces may be more successful than others in issuing calls to action" (p. 387). Warnick, Xenos, Endres, and Gastil (2005) cite numerous studies indicating that interactivity influences user response to websites.

The application of rhetorical theory to websites must explore the question of persuasion through interactivity. A website can be viewed as an invitation for the user to do something (Ha, 1998). Most of those invitations are facilitated through hyperlinks, and all links are strategic communication choices by website designers (Jackson, 1997). Strommer-Galley (2004) notes that HTML (hypertext markup language), on which the web is built, is primarily a way to deliver information in a

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[9] Stromer-Galley (2004) believes that the term "interactivity" is confusing because it is used to refer to a variety of phenomena, such as interaction between people, between people through mediated channels, between people and computers, and between computers. She notes that the first two are a type of social interaction between people, and the last two are a type of interaction that occurs between people and computer networks, and the literature conflates the two or treats them as if they belong in the same group or on the same continuum.

dynamic, nonhierarchical format. Lee (2005) defines hypertext as "computer-mediated text in which highlighted words or titles serve as links to other excerpts or modes of supporting information. . . . By these means, individuals can choose their own orders and levels of detail, and even modalities of communication materials, forming their own cohesion and sequence of information" (introduction, ¶ 2). Each user can interact with it in a unique way. For example, hyperlinks allow viewers to receive information in a range of sensory modes such as graphic, textual, video and audio. Lee notes that many studies indicate that the organization of content in a hypertext system alters learning outcomes. For example, Warnick et al. (2005) found higher levels of cognitive engagement on websites with increased content interactivity. They hypothesized that clicking on hyperlinks involves making decisions, which encourages a deeper engagement. A pilot study I conducted which included analysis of links on 33 congregational homepages showed a great diversity in the ways congregations use links. The number and kind of links on homepages varied greatly, and some congregations use graphics as well as text as hyperlinks.

Warnick et al. (2005) describe a form of interactivity on political campaign websites that is relevant to the study of congregational websites (see also Endres and Warnick, 2004). "Text-based interactivity" 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). Two aspects of overall style contribute to text-based interactivity: verbal style, defined as use of active voice, first and second person address, first names, and accessible style; and visual display, defined as text boxes, captioned photographs, endorsements of third parties, and photographs of the candidate with other people. Text-based interactivity is an example of reactive or quasi interactivity described by Rafaeli (1988), which occurs when a person sends a message to another, and the other responds in a manner coherent with the original message. Endres and Warnick cite Walter Ong's observation in 1982 that as society is entering an electronic age, it may also enter a period in which orality regains the kind of significance it has in cultures untouched by writing or print. Thus,

"discourse on the Web may be more effective to the extent that it resembles speech rather than print or mass media" (p. 328), and sites that directly address the viewer in a conversational style both in text and visual elements will likely have greater persuasive appeal than sites that use the style of newspapers, magazines or TV.

Xenos and Foot (in press) have observed two other aspects of interactivity in their study of campaign websites. Interactivity as transaction highlights the possibility of customized media. As a visitor explores a site, information about the visitor's interests can be collected by noting the links that are chosen or by more direct means such as questionnaires or member registration. A second form of interactivity, welcomed particularly by younger website viewers, is coproductive interactivity; this occurs when viewers can post responses and other viewers respond to those posts. This takes place on message-boards, multi-authored blogs, and chats, where the site's content becomes a collaboration between website producers and website visitors. Coproductive interactivity reduces the amount of control that site producers exercise over content on the sites, a concern noted by electoral campaign staff. But it also has the ability to produce higher levels of engagement by site visitors. All of these forms of interactivity – interpersonal, content, text-based, transactional, and coproductive – have relevance for the study of congregational websites. All forms of interactivity exercise persuasion in one way or another, as they provide the structures that facilitate the engagement of viewers with websites and presumably with the organization that created the site.

Metaphor, analogy, metonymy, synecdoche and other tropes, or figures of speech, have long been considered in rhetorical analysis (Leach, 2002) and have relevance for the study of organizational websites. Metaphor has traditionally been defined as a verbal figure involving the transfer of sense associated with one word to another. This transfer can take place between images as well as words, and this kind of transfer is becoming increasingly important as visual communication moves increasingly into the forefront (Hayles, 2002). Burbules (1998) discusses the significance of reading hyperlinks on a website as metaphors; for example "a link from

a page listing Political Organizations to a page on the Catholic Church might puzzle, outrage, or be ignored – but considered as a metaphor it might make a reader think about politics and religion in a different way" (p. 111). Burbules notes that web links using familiar shapes can be metonymic because a particular icon begins to stand in place for a particular web page, and web links often have characteristics of synecdoche, where the particular stands in for the general, because links as gateways to information associate parts with wholes. Clusters of links can thus influence the ways people think about subjects. Burbules argues that hyperbole, another familiar trope, is common on the web. The name – World Wide Web – and the collections, archives, and search engines on the web imply a degree of comprehensiveness that is simply not possible; the very nature of web vocabulary and dynamics are hyperbolic. These all have their own sort of "deceptive naturalness" (Burbules, p. 117), and a thorough rhetorical analysis of congregational websites will expose deceptive naturalness of these tropes in verbal and visual texts and in the structure of links.

Dialogical Discourse and Heteroglossia

Other characteristics of discourse can be discovered by applying the concept of heteroglossia (Smith, 2004; Lemke, 1988; HopKins, 1989; Knoeller, 1998), and this concept is particularly helpful in revealing issues on websites of Christian congregations. Mikhail M. Bakhtin (1981), a literary critic who wrote in the 1920s and 1930s in Stalinist Russia, discussed heteroglossia in the context of dialogicality in discourse. In Bakhtin's view, all texts are dialogical in that "they set up in one way or another relations between different 'voices'" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 214). However, texts differ in the extent to which they are dialogical. A highly dialogical text demonstrates relations between the voice of the author and other voices; those other voices may be represented, responded to, and built upon or excluded and suppressed. Bakhtin used the terms "centripetal" and "centrifugal" to describe the kinds of movement that are initiated by language. Centripetal speech is a centralizing force, language that exercises a homogenizing and hierarchicizing influence on the reader or hearer. Bakhtin experienced an abundance of this kind of speech in political discourse

in Russia under Stalin; Bakhtin used the term "authoritative discourse" to describe written or spoken speech, often by an authority, that lays out one centralizing viewpoint. Centripetal speech could be considered dialogical if it refutes or excludes other voices.

In contrast, centrifugal speech spins outward, generating possibilities, embracing diverse voices, moving towards fragmentation. Bakhtin used "heteroglossia" in two ways: to describe dialogical speech in general, and also to describe the intersection point of centripetal and centrifugal forces in written and spoken speech. Heterglossia comes from "prose's three-dimensionality, its profound speech diversity" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 315). Particularly in a novel, the reader encounters speech diversity in the multiplicity of voices of the characters, with the author's voice refracted through the voices of the characters and through the narrative. Bakhtin argues that a variety of horizons, a diversity of worlds, open up through heteroglossic text:

> The prose writer as a novelist does not strip away the intentions of others from the heteroglot language of his works, he does not violate those socio-ideological cultural horizons (big and little worlds) that open up behind heteroglot languages – rather, he welcomes them into his work. The prose writer makes use of words that are already populated with the social intentions of others and compels them to serve his own new intentions, to serve a second master (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 299, 300).

In literature, heteroglossia contributes to a dialogic relationship both between the author and the hero and between the reader and the characters (Bakhtin, 1994). This dialogism invites the reader to engage with diverse, hereroglossic voices of all the characters.

Bakhtin believed that the heteroglossic speech of the novel has exercised a profound influence on other genres, and will continue to do so. He uses the term "novelization" to describe this process of incorporating dialogic text into many different forms of speech, art and music (1981, p. 39). Music has always been dialogic to some extent, with Mozart paying homage to Bach by inserting small melodies and rhythms that echo themes from Bach's work. Contemporary music is highly dialogic, with the voices of earlier musicians incorporated frequently through imported bass

lines, melodies, and lyrics. The same is true in the visual arts. Perhaps no artist wants to be told that his or her art is derivative, but even the uneducated viewer of visual arts can often see styles and forms that seem to echo the voices of earlier artists. Websites stand in an artistic tradition where one artist draws upon the work of another, and web designs tend to be picked up, repeated, and used with minor modifications.

Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia as the balance point between centripetal and centrifugal forces describes the balancing act that has to occur in all Christian congregations, and this aspect of heteroglossia is a significant part of this study. Christian congregations affirm the presence of authoritative discourse in the Bible and Christian tradition, which function in a Christian community as sources of centripetal speech. Congregational leaders must also attempt to encourage the diverse gifts, services and activities of the congregation members and they must also speak the language of the culture well enough to show the ways the Christian faith connects with contemporary life; these patterns of communication contribute to centrifugal forces. This embrace of a place of tension between unity and diversity can be seen in the words of the Apostle Paul: "there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone" (I Corinthians 12:4-6, New Revised Standard Version). Congregational leaders, in sermons, written material and in visual discourse, have to find that place of heteroglossic balance described by Bakhtin, affirming the centrality of the message of the Christian faith while encouraging diverse and culturally relevant expressions of that faith.[10]

Many of Bakhtin's concepts are helpful in examining congregational websites. On most congregational websites, a multiplicity of voices, or "profound speech diversity," can be seen and heard. Diverse people plan the congregation's events and opportunities for service and engagement, and vestiges of their voices remain in the

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[10] This application of Bakhtin's theory, heteroglossia, to the tension point in congregations between a unitary voice and multiple voices was a major part of a paper I presented at the Academy of Homiletics annual meeting in December 2006 titled "Art Has Its Reasons: The Emerging Role of the Arts in Protestant Congregations."

announcements that describe those events and opportunities. Indeed, those announcements are "populated with the social intentions of others"; website producers, no matter how skilled in website design and no matter how much they are trying to produce a website with uniform characteristics, are still describing the social intentions of the people who plan the church's ministries. When considering the website from the point of view of the producers – the church leaders who set the policy for the websites and the web designers who create the layout – it seems that Bakhtin is right, that "the intentions of the prose writer [or the website producer] are refracted, and refracted at different angles" (1981, p. 300) because of the diverse voices and intentions that lie behind each component of the website. Both visual and verbal resources on a website can be considered "voices." Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) discuss the "grammar" of visual design, noting that that language of speech, such "vocabulary" and "lexis," have been applied to the analysis of visual resources (p. 1). Photos and graphics "speak." In our increasingly visual culture, interpreting the "voices" heard through photos and graphics is a significant challenge of scholars who examine texts.

Bakhtin's concept "novelization" is a thought-provoking way to describe the patchworked nature of websites. Behind each of the photos, announcements and summaries of the church's history lies a story, a small novel, or perhaps a chapter in a novel, with the story told by different people. In fact, even the official statements come out of real life situations and discussions among groups of people; a story lies behind every mission statement. Because most congregational websites use so many photographs the sense of story or novelization is close to the surface. Photos of groups of people on church websites often speak of the activities and events that are pictured, while photos of individuals often evoke emotions which imply a story that lies behind the expression on the person pictured. Heteroglossia as the balance point between centrifugal and centripetal speech can be seen in many aspects of congregational websites, as website producers seek to balance the congregation's central voice with the diverse activities, opportunities and voices of members. These ideas of

novelization, dialogicality, and heteroglossia, then, add important dimensions to this research.

<div align="center">Semiotics and Social Semiotics</div>

Semiotics, another concept that reveals insights about websites and organizations, is the study of anything that can be taken to be a sign (Chandler, 2002). The study of human sign making began with Plato and other philosophers in the fourth century BCE, who explored the ways that "things stand for other things." Aristotle, around the same time, defined signs (*semeion* in Greek) as having three dimensions: the physical part of the sign itself, the referent to which it calls attention, and its evocation of a meaning (Danesi, 2002). In the fourth century CE, Augustine defined a sign as "a thing which causes us to think of something beyond the impression the thing itself makes upon the senses" (1958, p. 34), and classified signs as natural, conventional, or sacred. Natural signs are found in nature (e.g. the rustling of leaves or bodily symptoms). Conventional signs are made by humans (e.g. gestures, words, and symbols), and Augustine believed that conventional signs serve a fundamental human need, enabling us to refer to and remember the world. Sacred signs such as miracles, according to Augustine, convey messages from God that can only be understood through faith. In the eleventh century a debate arose between Scholastics, who argued that the truth of religious belief exists independently of the signs used to represent it, and nominalists, who argued that signs capture only illusory and human versions of the truth.

The modern study of signs began with the work of John Locke in the seventeenth century, who noted the significance of signs as a way for philosophers to understand the interconnection between representation and knowledge. The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and the American philosopher Charles S. Peirce (1839-1914) independently laid out theories of semiotics which overlap in significant ways and which lay the groundwork for the application of semiotics to media texts today. Saussure saw the sign as a "binary phenomenon" (Danesi, p. 31),

consisting of two parts: the signifier and the signified. Peirce defined the sign as having three parts: the representamen (the form the sign takes), an object (what the representamen refers to), and the interpretant (the sense made of the sign, the meaning) (Chandler). In the twentieth century, semiotic theory was further developed by a host of semioticians, linguists, psychologists, and culture theorists, but Danesi states that the "basic Saussurean-Peircean paradigm, with its foundations in the writings of Aristotle, St. Augustine, the medieval Scholastic philosophers, and John Locke has remained intact to this day" (p. 31).

> Bignell (1997) describes the impact of signs in everyday life:
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> From a semiotic point of view, all of social life is a continual encounter with assemblages of signs, from the public experiences of advertising posters, shop windows and diversely dressed strangers in the street, to the more private experiences of watching television, choosing what kind of décor to use in the home or playing a computer game. As we become increasingly accustomed to living in a culture infused with media, semiotics is a particularly effective means of taking stock of this situation (p. 207).

Danesi (2002) describes additional aspects of the use of signs: "Human intellection and social life is based on the production, use, and exchange of signs. When we gesture, talk, write, read, watch a TV programme, listen to music, or look at a painting, we are engaging in sign-based behavior" (p. 28). Umberto Eco defined semiotics as "the discipline studying everything which can be used in order to lie, because if something cannot be used to tell a lie, conversely it cannot be used to tell the truth; it cannot, in fact, be used to tell at all" (quoted in Danesi, p. 28). This definition emphasizes the fact that humans have the capacity to represent the world in countless ways through a multiplicity of signs, and a variety of explicit or implicit motives may underlie our choice of signs. We may desire to tell what we consider to be the truth, we may want to shape the way viewers/readers understand the world, and we may desire to guide, manipulate, or even lie. Websites are an assemblage of signs, including photos, graphics, logos, headlines, brief and long verbal texts, and hyperlinks. The physical presence of the website on a screen is a sign as well. Semiotics is one helpful way to consider the ways various components on a website contribute to meaning.

The questions posed by semiotics have been around for some time, but social changes and shifts in forms of communication are bringing new issues to the fore. Kress (1996) notes the increase in visual communication, which he believes may be caused by increased use of technology and greater multiculturalism: "The visual is becoming increasingly dominant, as the verbal is becoming less so in many areas of public communication. . . . Language has become, largely, a visual element" (p. 20 and 25). Chandler (2002) builds on this idea: "In an increasingly visual age, an important contribution of semiotics . . . has been a concern with imagistic as well as linguistic signs, particularly in the context of advertising, photography, and audio-visual media" (p. 218). A second significant shift is an increasing move toward a market mentality. Cameron (2001) notes that the capitalist free market is increasingly seen as a model for all kinds of interactions, particularly in institutional communication. Kinds of discourse that were once primarily "informational" have become more "promotional" – that is, they are no longer designed simply to "tell," but also to sell (p. 130). Many genres that used to be non-commercial now incorporate features from commercial advertising. These moves towards increasing use of visual resources in communication and increasing selling and promotion are visible on organizational websites of all kinds, including congregational websites. Semiotic analysis is helpful in considering the impact of both of these changes.

Social Semiotics

Hall (1997) uses the phrase "politics of representation" to describe the way individuals are positioned to accept the preferred or dominant reading of a text, the reading which appears to be transparent and natural and thereby goes far to establish, maintain, and perpetuate social relations of power. Hall believes that meaning is never fixed, but it is stabilized within different cultures and languages because cultures share conceptual maps. In this discursive milieu, ideology becomes embedded in the surface appearance of things and represents them as "unchangeable, inevitable and natural" (Hall, 1982, p. 76). In a related outlook, Roland Barthes (1972) uses the term "myth" to describe the ways signs communicate a social and political message about the world.

The message always involves the "distortion or forgetting of alternative messages, so the myth appears to be exclusively true, rather than one of a number of different possible messages" (Bignell, 1997, p. 22). One goal of semiotic analysis is demystification, removing the impressions of naturalness from the myth or ideology. The construction of the myth through its use of semiotic resources can be revealed in order to show the ways it promotes one way of thinking while seeking to eliminate alternative views. Social semiotic analysis can help to reveal the power structures that lie behind or are exercised through the creation of myths. In the creation of any myth, someone or some group of people benefit. Someone decides which kind of representation will be used and which reading of the text will be the dominant reading.

　　　　With this perspective, social semioticians replace "semiotic code" with "semiotic resource," a term that originated in the work of Halliday, who argues that the grammar of a language is a "resource for making meanings," not a code or set of rules for producing correct sentences (quoted in van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 3, see also Hodge & Kress, 1988). Van Leeuwen defines semiotic resources as "the actions and artifacts we use to communicate, whether they are produced physiologically – with our vocal apparatus' with the muscles we use to create facial expressions and gestures, etc. – or by means of technologies – with pen, ink and paper; with computer hardware and software; with fabric scissors and sewing machines, etc." (p. 3). As soon as it becomes clear that any given type of material or activity constitutes a semiotic resource, we can describe its semiotic potential, its potential for making meaning. This potential needs to be studied in the social context, because meanings have already been introduced into society, whether they are explicitly recognized or not. Jewitt and Oyama (2001) point out that social semiotics as a tool for research becomes meaningful only when we begin to use its theories to ask questions, with three particular areas of focus: (a) the representational meaning of semiotic resources, which addresses many of the same issues as traditional semiotics; (b) the interactive meaning, which focuses on the relationship between viewer or reader and the world portrayed in the semiotic resource; and (c) the compositional meaning, which focuses on the actual structure of the text or

image being analyzed. The contribution of social semiotics to this study of websites lies in the emphasis on studying semiotic resources in their social context and the encouragement to ask questions about the interactive and compositional meaning of web texts.

Social semiotics makes an additional contribution in the area of ideology because it emphasizes the power structures at work in the social contexts in which semiotic resources are created and used. While Fairclough (2003) writes from the critical discourse analytic tradition, his definition of ideologies is relevant here: "representations of aspects of the world which can be shown to contribute to establishing, maintaining and changing social relations of power, domination and exploitation" (p. 9). The primary way this occurs is through communication patterns and processes. As a result, according to Thurlow and Jaworski (2006):

> Discourse is thus ideological in that it not only (a) construes and constitutes identities and relationships, and (b) represents and reproduces systems of belief and power, but because it (c) establishes and maintains structures of inequality and privilege. . . . [H]owever 'ideologically innocent' they may appear, texts and the social practices of which they are a part can still be tremendously powerful in reconstituting substantial areas of social life (Thurlow and Jaworski, 2006, p. 100).

Therefore, "whenever a sign is present, ideology is present too" (Voloshinov, 1973, quoted in Chandler, 2002, p. 216). Because congregational websites use collections of signs – or semiotic resources – to constitute identities and relationships and to represent systems of belief in stylized forms, issues of ideology must be considered, even though many people associated with congregational websites might not see them as ideological.

Ideology is also embedded in patterns of commerce. Fairclough (1989) points out the way that capitalism has developed over the last century: "[T]he capitalist economic domain has been progressively enlarged to take in aspects of life that were previous seen as quite separate from production. The *commodity* has expanded from being a tangible 'good' to include all sorts of intangibles" (p. 35, italics in original). The commodity mindset, Fairclough suggests, now envelops peoples' lives in

previously unimaginable ways, many of which are largely invisible and unrecognized. Myers (1999) offers similar observations, using the terminology "promotional culture" to describe the extension of the rhetoric of promotion to many spheres in Western culture, including education, politics, and religion. Congregational websites would be one example of this trend. Myers affirms Fairclough's observation that forms of promotion often appear to be natural and derived from common sense. Advertising provides a helpful illustration of the connections between the promotional culture and ideology; because organizational websites draw heavily on the advertising genre, the connections between advertising and ideology are particularly noteworthy. One of the aspects of advertising that has been naturalized is the implied relationship between the advertiser and the audience. Myers (1994) points out that advertisements make associations of meanings with commodities, and these associated meanings draw the viewer into a relationship. According to Fairclough, these relationships are hidden, they imply an ideal subject, and "actual viewers or listeners or readers have to negotiate a relationship with the ideal subject" (p. 49).

These relationships that have to be negotiated come about in part because no semiotic resource – including advertisements – is viewed in isolation. Advertisements are intertextual (Myers, 1994), drawing on other advertisements, and viewers interpret what they see in the light of countless other advertisements that have passed before their eyes (Cook, 2001). Ads, in fact, are "parasitic" (Cook, p. 33) – that is, they draw on associations from other advertisements and other genres – and viewers are positioned by advertisers to make those associations. As a result, advertisements rely on secondary orality (Ong, 1982) in a way that traditional print media do not (Cook). Ads and websites, for example, use imperatives and "you," and this approach works in part because we have grown accustomed to it in earlier advertisements (Myers). Fairclough (1989) uses the term "synthetic personalization" to describe a related strategy: the "tendency to give the impression of treating each of the people 'handled' en mass as an individual" (p. 62). In a similar manner, Cameron (2000) highlights advertising's use of a deliberately casual and informal style to create the illusion of

familiarity. Synthetic personalization, this informal style that gives an illusion of familiarity, contributes to a sense of individually tailored service with the promise of individual choice (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2006). The backdrop of the thousands of advertisements experienced over a lifetime has taught a viewer to expect this personal approach that promises abundant options. It is both a true and false promise, of course (Schwartz, 2004).

At the heart of this dynamic is an emphasis on visual resources over words. Chandler (2002) notes that advertisements are powerful examples of the way visual images are used to make implicit claims which the advertisers would never be willing to make more openly. On some level, viewers know that photos can lie, but on some other level viewers accept the naturalized idea that photos tell the truth (Winston, 1998). Myers (1994) points out that photos evoke a non-rational response on the part of viewers and involve the viewer in the construction of meaning, which gives photos great power. In addition, according to Myers, "[P]art of the meaning of pictures comes from associations with the image and style. . . As with associations with words, these meanings arise from changing associations with the things referred to, not from the form of the image" (p. 146-147). For example, Thurlow and Aiello (2007 in press) discuss the ways European cities use assemblages of images in posters and other tourist information to promote themselves as being rich in cultural diversity, drawing on the common perception that groupings of images imply diversity. However, in the case of these European cities, very few of the images show ethnic or other minorities. Therefore, the collections of images conceal uniformity. Ultimately the goal of social semioticians with respect to visual resources is to: "critique the mechanisms of representation by which visual resources are deployed to achieve ideological ends. Social semiotics looks not only to relate texts to contexts, but also to speculate on related social tendencies and their political implications" (Thurlow and Aiello, "The current study," ¶ 3). Social semiotics, in sum, provides the tools to begin to unpack the layers of meaning on websites and the power that lies behind the creation of the meaning.

Research Questions

In 1998, when organizations were just beginning to understand the significance of the World Wide Web, Esrock and Leichty (1998) wrote, "The WWW potentially offers an organization opportunities to move beyond passive forms of self-presentation to more active forms of agenda setting with relevant publics" (p. 309). Their words have proven prescient, but academic researchers have been slow to study organizational websites. Winter et al (2003) present two reasons why the importance of websites in forming perceptions of organizations has been overlooked in academic research. First, early websites were designed by human factors and internet design experts, rather than by professionals trained in presenting corporate identity. Second, most early website research focused on usability and user satisfaction issues. Only very recently have organizational websites become an object of study for the purpose of evaluating organizational self-presentation. Winter et al write, "Websites are on-stage work areas where a performance is given to an actual or implied audience of potential customers, employees, suppliers, partners, and regulators . . . They provide frames of symbolic representations that inform and lure these potential stakeholders in to take a closer look" (p. 311). Pudrovska and Feree (2004) echo some of the same themes: "[T]he analysis of Web sites provides a new and useful form of data about an organization's identity and priorities because, unlike media representations of the group, it is self-directed. . . . Thus a Web site provides an open space for self-representation to the rest of the world" (p. 118). This study is based on the conviction that congregational websites are self-directed performances of organizational identity, designed to provide frames of symbolic representation of the congregation's philosophy and priorities, an analytic strategy modeled by Young and Foot (2005).

While the website of an organization provides an opportunity for that organization to present its identity, the website cannot be conflated with the identity of that organization. Organizations have many avenues through which they reveal their philosophy and strategy; Leuthesser and Kohli (1997) cite communication, behavior and symbolism as three of those avenues. In the case of a congregation, many other

forms of communication exist in addition to the website, some of them written and some of them oral, including newsletters, brochures, and announcements and sermons in worship services, all of which communicate aspects of the congregation's identity. In addition, all sorts of activities take place in congregations, and they reveal aspects of the congregation's identity. A comprehensive study of congregational identity would require investigation of many forms of communication, behavior and symbolism. This study seeks to explore the ways congregations present their identities on websites, an endeavor that has merit because of the increasing significance of websites in presenting organizational identity (Pudrovska and Feree, 2004, Winter et al, 2003), and because congregations are increasingly moving to websites as a central communication tool (Larsen, 2001, Larsen, 2004).

Scholarship on personal home pages raises issues that are relevant to the study of organizational websites. Like organizational websites, personal home pages are web-based, self-directed performances of identity incorporating values and priorities (Miller, 1999; Arnold and Miller, 1999; O'Sullivan, 1999). Chandler (1998) notes that "virtual selves" have existed ever since people began publishing their own writing. Plato discussed this feature of the technology of books in the *Phaedrus* and *Seventh Letter,* observing that people can encounter one's ideas in the form of a "textual self" – one's published words – without meeting the author. The web provides a setting for many more people (and institutions) to present a "virtual self." Chandler argues that personal homepages, because they are a form of asynchronous communication, are more like textual forms of communication (letters or diaries) than like speech interaction. However, this comparison to textual forms of communication is limited, because websites can also have audio-visual media components and symbolic elements. More fundamentally, however, a difference between textual forms of communication, which are often viewed as linear, and personal home pages lies in the dynamic nature of websites, particularly in the complex connections accomplished through hyperlinks. Because of hyperlinks and because of the ability to make constant changes on websites, Chandler argues that the web is an ideal medium for the purposes

of dynamic identity management. Thurlow, Lengel and Tomic, 2004) note that the constructedness and fluidity of online identities reflect a growing understanding of personal identity as "openended and a life-long project" (p. 97). In her discussion of personal websites, Döring (2002) offers a useful review of contemporary, or postmodernist, perspectives on identity, noting that scholars today tend to think of identity as a dynamic structure with multiple self-aspects, a dialogical self that is not homogenous or static. Döring notes that scholars use terms like "patchwork identity," "narrative identity," "multiple self," "dynamic self," and "dialogical self" to emphasize the components of constructedness, change and diversity present on personal home pages (see also Thurlow, Lengel & Tomic). These qualities of personal home pages – their patchworked, dynamic, dialogical, and interactive aspects, and their reflection of identity as constructed rather than fixed – are also true of many components of organizational websites.

This study focuses on congregational websites because they collect in one place many kinds of information about the congregation's philosophy and strategy that used to be, and often still are, dispersed all around church buildings: welcome brochures that sit on a table near the church entrance, photos on physical bulletin boards, invitations to involvement in weekly worship bulletins, sermons on tape in the church library, and articles by church staff and leaders in monthly newsletters (Larsen, 2001, 2004; Dart, 2001). This body of information, patchworked together on congregational websites, presents multiple aspects of congregational life and gives insight into the congregation's philosophy and strategy. The way the information is visually organized and represented on congregational websites provides additional information about the way the congregational leaders view its identity, as do hyperlinks to pages within the website and to organizations outside the congregation. This study will build on the description by Winter et al. (2003) of organizational websites as "on-stage work areas," designed to "lure potential stakeholders," and also on the words of Pudrovska and Feree (2004) about the "self-directed . . . open space for self-presentation" found on organizational websites.

This study will seek to answer two research questions. First, in what ways do congregations present their organizational identity on their websites? The definition of organizational identity by Leuthesser and Kohli (1997) cited earlier – the way in which an organization reveals its philosophy and strategy through communication, behavior and symbolism – makes clear that facets of organizational identity presentation are varied. Verbal texts on websites have the capacity to communicate many things to the viewer, and so too do the format, graphics, photos, and logos as well as the website features such as hyperlinks and other interactive components. Many earlier studies of websites looked at verbal texts alone, but this study will focus on linguistic, visual and technical/material resources on congregational sites. Analysis of visual aspects is especially important due to the frequent description of emergent churches as "image-based." Emergent churches consciously embrace features of postmodern culture, which they take to mean, in part, the need to move beyond mere words to an embrace of images as significant means of communication (Carson, 2005; Bader-Saye, 2004). This passion in the emergent church is paralleled by the increased interest during the past few decades in analyzing visual discourse as a significant and under-appreciated mode of communication, as exemplified in the work of Barthes (1972, 1981), Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, 1998, 1999, 2001), and Evans and Hall (1999).

Organizational websites are "material-semiotic phenomena" (Lemke, 1999, p. 24). As Kress and van Leeuven (1998) point out, texts are not merely written, they are "designed" and multimodally articulated. Linguistic, visual and technical/material resources may echo, complement, or extend one another. They may also contradict. Therefore the interplay between these components has significance for researchers of websites. Regardless of their theological orientation or the presence or absence of a desire to embrace postmodern image-making, almost all congregations uses logos, photos, a variety of graphics, and various forms of interactivity on their websites in making strategic decisions how to represent their congregations. These choices impact their presentation of their organizational identity. In this study, linguistic and visual resources on congregational websites were studied using principles from semiotics and

rhetoric, with the goal of evaluating the ways they present the congregation's philosophy and strategy, values and priorities. Statements describing organizational values, history, rites, myths, and taboos were examined. Mission statements, slogans, and other statements of priorities were studied. Frames of meaning were analyzed. Visual resources were examined at the level of denotation, connotation, and mythology. Hyperlinks, both links to pages within the site and links to outside organizations, were analyzed to determine what they indicate about priorities of the congregation and the associations valued by its leaders.

The second research question addresses the issue of persuasion. In what ways do congregations encourage and enable engagement on their websites? Christian congregations are mandated by the New Testament to "preach the gospel," to attempt to persuade individuals to engage with the Christian faith, to begin or deepen a life of Christian discipleship. In this study, several dimensions of engagement, or persuasion, were examined: (1) Persuasive appeals that encourage involvement with the congregation or with the Christian faith; appeals can be verbal or visual, explicit or implicit. (2) Internal links that enable online connection to church ministries, staff and leaders, as well as the language used in connection with these links. (3) Outlinks to community and denominational organizations, and the language associated with those links. (4) Links to online community, such as online polls, prayer request networks, bulletin boards, chat, and blogs that are related to the congregation, as well as the verbal descriptions that present the connections between online community and the kinds of face-to-face community that have been traditional in congregations for generations. (5) Interactivity, including the features that enable engagement with the website itself, including audio and video; text-based interactivity, the rhetorical techniques and features of the website text that communicate a sense of engagement to site visitors, such as casual photographs, first names, and first and second person address; and coproductive interactivity, the possibility that site viewers participate with site producers to create content for the website. These dimensions of analysis address the traditional concerns of rhetorical studies by focusing on persuasive language, but

they also address the concerns raised by internet researchers who understand that persuasion on the web involves interactivity, online community and new forms of address through linguistic and visual resources.