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## The Modern Church Communicates: Rhetoric and Hypertext in Church Website Design

Edward Palmer  
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THE MODERN CHURCH COMMUNICATES: RHETORIC AND HYPERTEXT IN  
CHURCH WEBSITE DESIGN

by

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B.A. University of Central Florida, 2012

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of English  
in the College of Arts and Humanities  
at the University of Central Florida  
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Major Professor: J.D. Applen

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## **ABSTRACT**

The Internet and the World Wide Web have supplanted many paper-based information systems. People turn to the web to locate local services in the same way they find ecommerce sites such as Amazon. Churches of all sizes must develop effective and attractive websites to attract new members and inform existing members. These two groups form distinct audiences that must be correctly targeted by the website content. Other churches may visit to gather ideas for their programs; they are a third group of site visitors. Organization of hypertext on the web requires skills that are different than writing for print. Technical communicators possess those skills and can help others write better hypertext. This research examines eight churches that cross three categories: denomination, size, and location. The websites of the churches are analyzed from the standpoint of the reader and the technical communicator to determine their effectiveness in content, organization, and underlying structure of the webpages, and then consider if geography, size, or denomination account for the observed differences. Audience and message are lesser issues than organization of information and navigational guidance for the reader. No remarkable differences were observed based on size, geography, or denomination. The technical communicator can assist non-technical content producers in developing skills in organization and classification.

For my mother, who encouraged me to continue my education even after a 30-year break.

I wish dementia had not kept you from seeing me complete this program.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Every writer has a muse, and my muse has been my wife, Laurie. She has patiently listened to me talk about topics of interest to me but not her and rant about the writing process. She made me coffee so I can keep going (special thanks to Community Coffee for home delivery). She has never known me when I was not in school and facing a deadline of some sort. For your support, my undying love. I would like to think that my work here will make a difference in your ministry.

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To the faculty of the Department of English for taking a programmer who is used to dealing in things literal and concrete and teaching him critical thinking in the humanities, I offer my sincerest gratitude. This is especially true for my thesis committee. J.D. Applen, thank you for the ideas, direction, and (when needed) pushing me where I needed to go; Dan Jones, thank you for demonstrating and demanding focus, discipline, and concise writing; and Sonia Stephens, thank you for catching issues before they could become insurmountable obstacles.

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS

ARC	Association of Related Churches
BBS	Bulletin Board System
CCS	Critical Code Studies
CMC	Computer-mediated Communications
CMS	Content Management System
CSS	Cascading Style Sheets
DH	Digital Humanities
DNS	Domain Name Service
EPPO	Every Page Is Page One
GFC	Grace Family Church
GPC	GracePointe Church
HTML	Hypertext Markup Language
HTTP	Hypertext Transfer Protocol
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
TCP/IP	Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol
UCC	United Church of Christ
UMC	United Methodist Church
URI	Uniform Resource Identifier
URL	Uniform Resource Locator

# CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

## Foundations

The search for information has taken a radical turn during the Internet Age. AltaVista from Digital Equipment Corporation (DEC) was introduced in 1995 as a full-text indexing system for web search, and DEC reported that year that it processed about 2.5 million web searches per day. Google, in 2011, processed 4.7 billion queries per day; by 2013, that number had increased to 5.1 billion web searches per day, or nearly 60,000 per second (Baker 10, Bilton). “Google” has become a verb as well as a noun in our culture: “If you want to learn more, you can always Google it” (Bilton).

The combination of the search engine and smartphone redefines how consumers look for information about businesses and services. Business information was once concentrated in telephone directories and categorized. Although the telephone directory has not completely gone away, cities have passed regulations to allow residents to opt out of receiving one, or, in the extreme, the consumer must opt in (Gonzales). A blog entry from 2015 on a broadcaster’s website posits, “Most people simply don’t use a phone book anymore. With their smartphone always ready, they can just use Google to find a local business” (Theisen). Baker notes that this has users following a pattern of information filtering and foraging. Users filter the content of the entire Internet via a search engine, then forages through that information to find adequate information to satisfy their needs (Baker 1-3, 10-11).

This shift in acquisition and distribution of information about the world around us has impact throughout our civilization. Religious institutions must work in this new world as well.

Christians believers attempt to draw the non-believer or unconverted into the church through a process called *evangelization*—testimony about the believer’s faith and information about the life of Jesus Christ and of the church community. Churches through the ages evangelized primarily through face-to-face contact and printed materials such as bibles, tracts, and information bulletins. When Christians move into a new city, they will seek out a new congregation to join. Before the explosion of the web, people found churches through word-of-mouth contact and tools such as telephone books and city directories. With telephone books and city directories becoming less prevalent, churches must now make information about their congregation and activities available on the web to survive and thrive. Potential converts and new members will visit the church first in the virtual world through the church’s website and then decide if they want to visit the physical church.

Existing members look to the web for calendars of events and meetings, available ministry groups, and communiques from the leadership (pastors and lay leaders). These used to be disseminated through weekly bulletins distributed at services and newsletters mailed to members’ homes. Members now go to the web to find this information. Members of other congregations looking for resources may explore a church’s website. They will look for ideas for education and ministry, or they are curious how their sister churches are addressing certain topics (Baab 75-76).

However, authors must develop content for the web in a different way than they develop content for print. The web and broadband networking provide underlying technologies to produce texts that include words, pictures, video, and audio. No longer simply words on a printed page, *text* is multimedia. It is interactive. The readers of the website determine the path

that brings them to a specific webpage and then on to another. The readers determine if the next page is on the same website or another. The readers “become participants, control outcomes, and shape the text itself” (Bernhardt 412). The readers are members of “the involved audience . . . an actual participant in the writing process who creates knowledge and determines much of the content of the discourse” (Johnson 93). Power shifts toward readers and away from authors, and authors must adjust accordingly.

Rhetoricians have written about the importance of crafting the message for the audience since the time Aristotle (Crowley and Hawhee 179-183). Authors may be challenged to write for one audience in a non-hypertext environment. The non-professional who writes for three audiences in a hypertext environment faces obstacles at every turn.

I will observe how church websites address the three audiences—visitors, members, and resource seekers—through an examination of the rhetoric of the pages seen by these readers.

Questions to guide my observations include:

- Do the pages engage the reader in a two-way discourse?
- Since large churches may have more resources for their online presence than small churches, are there meaningful differences in the way they address the three identified audiences?
- Does the church’s affiliation with a denomination change the discourse?

### Technical Communication

The field of technical communications offers a framework for observing the rhetoric of church websites. Technical communicators deal with the demands of new media, the Internet,

and the involved audience as a regular part of their work. Baker observes that technical communicators must produce texts that meet the reader's expectations where web-oriented search and navigation features are ubiquitous (x).

The distance between church websites and technical communications is not as far as it may appear at first consideration. The creation of any website is a process that involves processing technical information. The church must select and register a domain name such as *churchname.org*. The church must setup the website's technical foundation. This involves selecting a hosting service or deploying a cloud server, configuring the Domain Name Service (DNS) to associate the domain name with the server, and installing the website software. The latter may be a webserver such as Apache or Nginx, or it may be those plus a content management system such as WordPress or Joomla. Service providers offer packages that provide all of this to a church, but a church may choose to handle these tasks (or a subset) based on need and available volunteers or staff with technical knowledge. Once set up, the church must design and develop content. The developers must understand how the content management system works. To understand may include developing some level of expertise in Hypertext Markup Language (HTML), multimedia formats, and other technical details. Content development determines how the church presents itself online and should accurately reflect the church's culture and persuade the audiences through the rhetorical tools that are available to the website designer and content author.

Technical writers developing documentation for the setup, configuration, and operation of a website can assist churches in their efforts to inform and evangelize on the web. Since more than half of the Christian congregations in the United States have less than 100 attendees weekly

(Roozen 2), they likely will not have professional developers unless one is a member or the church contracts for support. Volunteers and staff in these smaller churches create and maintain the website. These maintainers may not have a strong technical background. They need good technical documentation to succeed. This documentation would address a non-technical or semi-technical audience and cover typical deployment scenarios that a small organization such as a church or non-profit would encounter when establishing their presence on the Internet.

Technical writers may also guide and inform church website designers and content providers in rhetorical processes and web discourse. As Johnson points out, “Whether it is a computer, a vacuum, a horse-drawn plow, or even language itself, users are always connected with an activity through a technological artifact” (93-94). The field of technical communications, because of its current focus on creating web content, can educate web authors in other fields how best to inform, persuade, and enter a dialogue with the readers. This raises additional questions for my research:

- What can technical communicators learn about guiding non-specialists in website and content creation?
- How can technical communicators construct hypertext that is effective when the rhetorical position is built more on pathos than logos?

## Hypertext

We have broad agreement that the origin of the modern concept of hypertext derives from Vannevar Bush’s 1945 article in *The Atlantic Monthly* entitled “As We May Think.” Several who have written on hypertext and its foundations reference Bush’s article describing a device he



calls the “memex” (Landow 9–13; Nelson 1/39–1/54; Bolter 34–35). The memex stores everything for a user, and the user links the information contained within the memex in “trails” that connect information in one source to information in another. Theodor Nelson is credited with coining the term “hypertext” in his description of the Xanadu project (Nelson 0/2; Bolter 10). He describes that hypertext is “*non-sequential writing*—text that branches and allows choices to the reader, best read on an interactive screen” (0/2; emphasis in the original).

Various software products implemented the hypertext concepts in different forms. For example, Digital Equipment Corporation offered a product called VTX on the VAX/VMS (later called OpenVMS) operating system. VTX was capable of “interlinking” information from multiple sources (*infobases*) in a network and delivering them to a user. “Infobases can store a variety of document types, ranging from text to compound documents containing charts, images, and graphics” (“Compaq VTX” 1).<sup>1</sup> VTX clients could only retrieve information from VTX servers. The Gopher protocol, developed at University of Minnesota, also offered the ability to organize and publish information on the Internet for access by systems running a client that could “speak” Gopher across TCP/IP. A server might return an item, a list of items, or “‘links’ to

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<sup>1</sup> Digital Equipment Corporation (DEC) merged with Compaq Computer Corporation in 1997. Hewlett-Packard Company acquired Compaq in 2002. Hewlett-Packard Company split in 2015 and Hewlett Packard Enterprise took ownership of all server-related assets. That is why a DEC product is branded Compaq in a document from 1999 that is hosted on hp.com and published by Hewlett Packard Enterprise. In another twist, VMS Software, Inc. acquired the intellectual property for OpenVMS products from Hewlett-Packard in 2014.

objects on other servers” to a gopher client (Gihring). Some programs such as Apple’s HyperCard supported compound (multimedia) documents with links but not in a networked environment.

Working at CERN, Sir Tim Berners-Lee was also working on a way to share information between networked computers. In 1989-90, he developed the core standards that sit at the foundation of the web: Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) uses *tags* to define information in documents (based on SGML, the Standard Generalized Markup Language), the Uniform Resource Identifier (URI) for encoding the location and type of information (the Uniform Resource Link, or URL, is a form of URI), and the Hypertext Transfer Protocol (HTTP) for defining the way a client and server transmit information over a network. Berners-Lee championed releasing his design and code without requiring royalties, making it possible for the development of additional applications that could leverage the protocols and exchange information on the web. This decision and the lack of central authority on the web are likely responsible for the growth of HTML to the point that nearly 40% of the human population had used the web (“History of the Web”).

Although the term *hypertext* could apply to documents in a *memex*, the hypertext of the Xanadu system, a VTX infobase, information from a Gopher server, or a document formatted in HTML, I will use the term specifically to refer to documents on the web that are formatted in HTML. Similarly, *text* will be used in a generic sense to refer to any source of information. In addition to words on a paper or a computer screen, it includes multimedia and source code such as HTML.

A webpage will not be composed solely of HTML, however. Modern web technologies employ to other additional languages to describe the visual layout of the page and create an interactive environment for the user that goes beyond simple hyperlinks. In the original system designed by Berners-Lee, website designers were unable to totally control the display of the page. Any options for display, such as the font, were attributes of an HTML element. The inability to separate form from function led to the creation of a new language, Cascading Style Sheets (CSS). CSS describes the form—the display characteristics—for the elements. The CSS code can be embedded in the HTML, included as a separate file to simplify maintenance, or omitted entirely.

JavaScript is a procedural programming language that can also be embedded in a webpage. HTML and CSS are *descriptive* languages: they describe an environment, but they cannot describe an algorithm like a procedural language does. JavaScript is executed within the client environment; in other words, the user's web browser will interpret the JavaScript and perform the algorithms it describes. The user's device and browser do not have to interact with the server to offer dynamic content to the user. JavaScript, like CSS, is an optional component of a webpage.

I will refer to the entirety of the components that make up a webpage as the *source code* (or simply code) and offer more specificity if required. The *user* or *reader* is the person who is reading the webpage on a laptop, tablet, smartphone or other device with a web browser application, and that device and browser are collectively the *client*. Therefore, interpreting HTML, CSS, and JavaScript are all *client-side* activities because they are handled within the user's device and browser.

## Website Selection

To bound this research, it is necessary to limit the number of websites that are included. Therefore, the selection of sites must be based on some set of criteria. The three criteria chosen for this study are size, denomination, and location.

As previously mentioned, churches have a wide disparity of sizes, from small churches with tens of worshippers each week to megachurches with over 2000. Roozen observes, “[O]rganizational and in reality, small congregations face any number of uphill battles in terms of vitality and viability” (2). If small churches can learn from larger churches about outreach and grow to break the 100-attendee barrier, they have a higher chance of survival and increased viability. It should be noted that the division points of 100 and 2000 attendees are arbitrary; “Nothing magical happens when a congregation’s membership passes 2,000. A congregation of 1900 members and another congregation of 2100 might be very similar . . .” (Baab 3). The lower boundary corresponds with the threshold crossed between the FACT2010 survey of congregations and the FACT2015 survey (Roozen 2). These boundaries are also approximate for the purposes of this study. Obtaining accurate attendance estimates was difficult, especially for churches that are not part of a denomination that reports membership figures to a denominational body. For those that did, I used the membership numbers reported as an estimation of worship size. In other cases, I attempted to estimate worship based on the size of the building or pictures of worship services found on the church’s website or available via social media websites.

The denomination of the church is the second criterion used for selection of subject websites. Will the theology of a church or its affiliation with a denomination affect the way the church communicates via its website? I have chosen to divide the sites selected into two

denominational pools. The first consists of denominations that are commonly referred to as “mainline” or “mainstream” Protestantism. The denominations included vary depending on the source. Baab relied upon the Pew Forum definition in her research, where the denominations are “the left, center and liberal wings” (Pew Forum; qtd. in Baab 5) of five larger American Protestant denominations. Coalter, et al. use a slightly different definition, grouping “churches that emerged from the American Revolution as dominant Protestant bodies . . . It includes the Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Methodists, Congregationalists (now the United Church of Christ), Disciples [of Christ], and American or northern Baptists” (7). These two definitions have in common the Presbyterians, Episcopalians, United Church of Christ (UCC), and Methodists. The logical choice for one denomination would be from this common group. I have selected churches that are members of the United Methodist Church (UMC) as one denominational group. This was done for three reasons. First, I have previously worshiped regularly in an Episcopal congregation and I am married to a Presbyterian minister. The knowledge I have of the two denominations from my participation in affiliated churches could potentially influence the way that I look at them. Secondly, the UMC is a much larger denomination than the United Church of Christ, offering a greater selection of churches. Finally, the UMC had churches in the megachurch category in the selected geographies, but the UCC did not. In general, megachurches tend to be non-denominational and theologically conservative, so mainline megachurches are not as common as non-denominational megachurches (Tucker 77).

Dr. Martin Luther King said, “[E]leven o’clock on Sunday morning is one of the most segregated hours—if not *the* most segregated hours [sic] in Christian America” (King). The mainline denominations I considered trace their roots to the Protestant Reformation and

European cultures. The culture is primarily White and English-speaking: the United Methodist Church reports their membership is 90.058% White and 6.169% African American/Black (General Council on Finance and Administration “2015 Membership by Ethnicity and Gender”). The ethnicity of the four UMC churches in this study is presumed to reflect this distribution based upon pictures on the websites showing members of the congregation.

The second denominational group consists of churches that do not identify with a mainline denomination or any denomination at all. The non-denominational churches (“non-denoms”) are one of the top five religious groups in nearly all states that should be treated as “a unique religious phenomenon—as a distinctive religious market segment” (Thumma). Thumma specifically excludes the Vineyard Church and Calvary Chapel affiliates from his definition of non-denominational, retaining a “pure” definition of churches with no affiliation at all. I found it necessary to include these churches in my second group to locate a smaller church with a maintained website in close geographical proximity to a non-denominational megachurch. Both Vineyard and Calvary Chapel share the more conservative theology and greater diversity that is common in the non-denominational megachurches, so this expansion of the definition is not entirely arbitrary. Although there are no formal statistics for the ethnic composition of these non-denominational churches, the pictures on the websites of the chosen churches show congregations that are mostly White, although more racially and culturally diverse than the UMC churches.

The final grouping is geographical. Research indicates that attendees who worship at congregations smaller than the megachurch size generally travel 20 minutes or less to church (Bruce and Woolever 27). Megachurches tend to be in suburban areas but draw attendees from a

larger geographical base. They will have worshipers who regularly commute more than 15 minutes to the church (Karnes et al. 262-63; Tucker 97-100). I chose to select churches where some segment of the population of the area would have no more than 15-20 minutes to each of the churches in the group. Churches chosen for this study are all located outside the downtown centers of their cities and in suburban, but not rural, locations.

Also of interest was the effect the surrounding area had on the congregation. Did a church's message or identity have a regional aspect? Did two churches, similar in size and denomination, also share similarities in their messaging? Answering these questions required having two sets of churches in two different areas. I selected Tampa and Orlando for comparison. The cities are similar in size and both are in central Florida. Both have major industries, large research universities, and a population that is dispersed through surrounding suburbs rather than concentrated near the city center. I hypothesize that because the two areas are more alike than different, the way that the churches present themselves on the web will also be more similar than different. Significant differences would indicate that there is something about one church or the other that is unique to that congregation.

Including a small and large mainline congregation and a small and large non-denominational congregation from both Tampa and Orlando means that a total of eight churches should be part of the study. This parallels Lynne Baab's rhetorical analysis of six congregations, two each from mainline, megachurch, and emerging church (3-7). The churches selected for this study and the categories they belong to are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Churches selected for study

Geography	Denomination	Size	Church Name	Website
Tampa	Non-denominational	Megachurch	Grace Family Church	<a href="http://gfconline.com">http://gfconline.com</a>
Tampa	UMC	Megachurch	Van Dyke Church	<a href="http://vandyke.org">http://vandyke.org</a> <sup>2</sup>
Tampa	Non-denominational	Small	Acacia Grove Church	<a href="http://acaciagrove.org">http://acaciagrove.org</a>
Tampa	UMC	Small	Forest Hills United Methodist Church	<a href="http://foresthillsumc.com">http://foresthillsumc.com</a>
Orlando	Non-denominational	Megachurch	Northland, A Church Distributed	<a href="http://northlandchurch.net">http://northlandchurch.net</a>
Orlando	UMC	Megachurch	St. Luke's United Methodist Church	<a href="http://www.st.lukes.org">http://www.st.lukes.org</a>
Orlando	Non-denominational	Small	GracePointe Church	<a href="http://gpnaz.us">http://gpnaz.us</a>
Orlando	UMC	Small	Lakeside Fellowship	<a href="http://lakesidefellowship.org">http://lakesidefellowship.org</a>

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<sup>2</sup> In September 2016, Van Dyke Church rebranded itself as Bay Hope Church and changed their website address to <http://bayhope.church>. The organization of the website did not significantly change, and the old [vandyke.org](http://vandyke.org) domain forwards to [bayhope.church](http://bayhope.church). All research was done prior to the church's name and domain change, so the old name and domain are reflected here.



Grace Family Church (GFC) is a large non-denominational church with multiple locations in the Tampa area. The main campus is in Lutz, a northern suburb of Tampa. There are four other physical locations for GFC. The GFC Lutz campus has two services on Sunday morning, and the photographs on social media indicate that the church is large enough to have a total worship attendance greater than 2000.

Van Dyke Church is a United Methodist Church about two miles from Grace Family Church. Van Dyke Church is the 22nd largest UMC church by attendance in the United States, with a weekly attendance in 2014 of 2379 (General Council on Finance and Administration “2014 Top 100 Churches in Size and Membership”).

Acacia Grove Church is a non-denominational church in north Tampa, about six miles away from Grace Family Church and Van Dyke Church. Acacia Grove does not indicate their membership numbers on their website, but photographs on social media indicate that the church has a small attendance at the one Sunday service.

The final church in the Tampa area is Forest Hills United Methodist Church. They are slightly further away from Grace and Van Dyke in the north Tampa area, but still within the 15-20-minute driving range of either church, making it well within reach for much of the north Tampa and Lutz population. The United Methodist Church website shows a membership of 104 for Forest Hills. By inference, the weekly attendance is likely under 100 (United Methodist Communications).

Northland, A Church Distributed (hereafter “Northland”) has its main campus in the Longwood suburb north of Orlando, with satellite campuses in Oviedo and Eustis. The main campus offers four weekend services and one on Monday evenings. According to their website,

“Approximately 20,000 people consider Northland their church home” (“Frequently Asked Questions”). That same page also states, “We are a Christ-centered, Evangelical church, not affiliated with any denomination.”

The large denominational church in the Orlando area included in this study is St. Luke’s United Methodist Church. St. Luke’s is smaller than the non-denominational megachurches, but the mainline churches in the Orlando area also tend to be smaller than the non-denominational or the Evangelical churches. St. Luke’s is the 55th largest UMC church by membership (4482 members) and 53rd by attendance (1761 average attendance) in the United States (General Council on Finance and Administration “2014 Top 100 Churches in Size and Membership”). It is also the largest UMC church in the Orlando area. It is on the western side of Orlando and about 25 miles away from Northland. There is a small area south of Eatonville that would lie within a 20-minute drive of both Northland and St. Luke’s.

GracePointe Church is in the community of Lake Mary, about six miles north of Northland. GracePointe meets in the Lake Mary Community Center and has one Sunday service. Videos on the social media website Periscope show a small congregation at worship.

The final church in the study is Lakeside Fellowship, a United Methodist Church in Sanford. It is north of GracePointe Church and about 12 miles from Northland. In researching small UMC churches near Northland, Lakeside Fellowship stood out because it was the only one in the area north of Orlando that had a website that was actively maintained.

## Looking Forward

In the next chapter, I will examine the relevant literature that supports my research. I will look at how the digital humanities establishes a foundation for looking at hypertext through the lens of the humanities. I will also review an interesting approach to discourse studies in the virtual world and discuss how it applies to my research. Technical communication offers an approach for the critique of website design and content creation. Finally, I will review other research of religion on the Internet and show the way other researchers both establish groundwork for my research and look at different aspects of the practice of religion on the Internet.

Chapter Three looks at the rhetoric of these websites as seen by the visitor. I will consider how size, location, and denomination affect the way the church presents its identity, establishes ethos, and addresses each of the three different audience types a church website might have.

Chapter Four will re-examine these same websites in a different context. In this chapter, I will revisit the websites through the lens of the website designer and technical communicator. I will look at the page design, the navigation, and the text for usability and clarity.

In the final chapter, I will review the findings from the previous two chapters. I will offer suggestions for how this work can be useful to those responsible for a church's presence on the Internet, the technical communicator, and the researcher in the digital humanities. I will reflect on my work in researching and reporting on this subject. Finally, I will provide directions for future research that can take place in each discipline in response to the findings.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Delving into a church website to analyze the congregation's communication of identity through the visible content and the HTML is necessarily an interdisciplinary effort. Each discipline makes unique contributions to understanding the efficacy of the whole. Three areas of study influence my thinking and inform my viewpoint: the digital humanities and related areas; discourse analysis; and the field of technical communication. A small number of researchers have examined the electronic communications practices of modern religion. Their research also guided me during my study.

Electronic text breaks many of the implicit assumptions one makes when thinking about "text" only being written words on a physical page. The nascent field called "digital humanities" and related areas such as digital rhetoric, critical code studies, and software studies provide structural framework to examine hypertext. Jay David Bolter establishes the importance of understanding the interaction of medium and message. Douglas Eyman offers a theoretical foundation for the study of digital rhetoric. Rosemarie Coste delves deeper into the medium of hypertext to look at the ultrastructure, the layers behind the "screen essentialism" in a web-based hypertext. Since HTML is an expression of an XML schema, tools for the generic (XML) can apply to the specific (HTML). J.D. Applen and Rudy McDaniel describe how XML makes a rhetorical statement.

According to Janice "Ginny" Redish, the website author enters into a conversation with the reader. Therefore, discourse theory can be a useful tool to examine this conversation. For an organizational website, the organization may not want the reader to see the author as a specific person, but rather a role or a voice that goes beyond the individual. James Paul Gee combines

discourse theory and the virtual world to construct a “unified” discourse analysis that spans the physical world and virtual worlds.

Technical communication today has a strong focus on web publication since many technical documents produced today are born digital and stay there. Technical documentation is frequently distributed on a website. This work may suggest ways that technical communicators can educate the volunteer or casual communicator in connecting with an audience through a website. Effective communications relies on a well-designed page that considers how rhetoric affects communication, how a website can best look at the needs of the audience, and how writing a webpage requires a different approach than writing printed text. The writer must use smaller units of text and more graphics, and make a more direct presentation of information that eliminates superfluous content.

The selection of church websites as a topic does not imply a focus on theology or an attempt to compare denominational belief systems. Rather, looking at church websites provides an insight into how a specific group communicates in a virtual world. Where websites like Amazon are purely virtual in nature, a church website spans the virtual and physical space. The church belongs to a neighborhood, town, or city. It necessarily has a local focus since its members will gather together in a physical space. Churches also have a great variance in size and resources; some have professionals who build and maintain the website, and others are volunteer efforts. Sometimes the volunteers have little technical or communications training. Contrasting the two while controlling for general demographics may offer interesting and useful insights into communications practices.

In the discipline of communications, Heidi Campbell calls for greater research at the intersection of the Internet and religion. Lynne Baab investigated the projection of identity by churches through their websites; her work overlaps mine but lacks the focus on the intertextuality of the webpage and its underlying source code. Electronic communications in religion but outside the context of the church offers a view into other ways that religious activity is practiced on the Internet. “What are potential churchgoers shopping for?” is a starting point for investigating the effectiveness of a church’s communications with a prospective member.

### Digital Humanities

Discussions of the digital humanities often encounter the problem of defining the field.

There are some methods and areas of study that are clearly defined as digital humanities: these employ computers to study traditional objects of humanistic study, an area that was once called *humanities computing*. Other methods and areas bear a more ambiguous relation to digital humanities, such as media study and rhetoric and composition. (Reid 15; emphasis in original)

Alexander Reid observes that the field of digital humanities has its history in humanities computing, which can be succinctly defined as the use of computers in the study of the humanities. An early example of humanities computing is the *Index Thomisticus* of Father Roberto Busa. Father Busa’s index was a concordance of the works of St. Thomas Aquinas and related authors. The project started in the late 1940s with Thomas J. Watson and IBM supplying computer resources, was published in print in 1974, and a CD-ROM version was released in 1992 (Hockey 4).

Digital humanities (referred to by its foremost practitioners as “DH”) takes a subtle shift from humanities computing. In humanities computing, the computer is a tool that is used in the study of the humanities. Father Busa says it “is precisely the automation of every possible analysis of human expression . . . but whose nucleus remains the discourse of written texts” (xvii). The mainframe and Hollerith cards supported his research on St. Thomas Aquinas, but he studied a written text, not the computer he was using or a text composed on punch cards. DH includes humanities computing, but extends it to include the computer in the subject of study. As Schriebman et al. put it, DH practitioners are “using information technology to illuminate the human record, and bringing an understanding of the human record to bear on the development and use of information technology” (xxiii).

This expansion of humanities computing to DH has created opportunities for researchers to look at “text” in new ways. Lev Manovich described it as “new media” and said that “the popular understanding of new media identifies it with the use of a computer for distribution and exhibition rather than production” (19). Although he rejects this definition as “too limiting” (19), and, in particular, denies the significance of “digital” in defining new media (52-55), the foregrounding of the computer’s role and effect on text and media is a distinguishing characteristic of DH studies. Douglas Eyman argues that Manovich misses “the power of ‘digital’ as an organizing principle” (20). Media and text in DH occupy a space that includes both the digital and the physical, where the digital has “everted” into the physical world, creating a “mixed reality” or “augmented reality” (S. Jones). The “digital” in digital humanities can encompass computers, communications networks, and a whole host of information and communications technologies (ICT).

This shift from print to mixed reality or augmented reality where ICT is an inextricable part of the text requires a change in approach for rhetorical critique. It is now necessary to consider rhetoric in a digital text. Eyman offers a general definition: “The term ‘digital rhetoric’ is perhaps most simply defined as the application of rhetorical theory (as analytic method or heuristic for production) to digital texts and performances” (13). Rhetoric in a digital space is one that is different than in a physical one, James Zappen argues, because the characteristics of the digital are different, encouraging the rapid exchange of ideas on a global stage that at the same time encourages self-expression and allows for anonymity, but also can impact personal privacy. Yet it offers an opportunity to explore the way identity is formed since a person may experiment with multiple online selves that may have strong similarity or great differences from the identity presented in the physical world (321-22).

Eyman shows how the five canons of classical rhetoric can be redefined to apply to digital rhetoric. Invention involves the use of the tools of different media and modes to locate information. Arrangement is remixing this information into new works; Web 2.0 techniques of integrating content from different websites is an example here. Style is how one understand and uses the different elements of design such as fonts and multimedia. The delivery uses the systems of distribution: social media and blogs are two examples, but this can go deeper to look at the underlying technology. Memory is being able to negotiate the tools to store and retrieve information (65). Memory in a digital context also includes the archival and retrieval of digital artifacts when software changes, web servers are decommissioned, and digital texts can be manipulated and remixed, all significant problems throughout all of DH (Eyman 72, Eyman and Ball 74-75). This framework allows such diverse techniques as server log analysis of web usage,



research in the production and content of born-digital documents, content analysis, and network visualization to all be used as methods of rhetorical analysis (97-110).

Matthew Kirschenbaum suggests that using forensic analysis of physical components of the computer or transmission of a text can parallel textual studies for physical books in the world of new media (18). He offers a close reading of a computer hard drive, “a physical storage device that is typically both unseen and little understood” (18) as a counterweight to screen essentialism, which, he argues, “has pervaded much of the critical and theoretical writing about electronic textuality to date” (19). The screen is so much of a focus that it seems to be a synecdoche for the computer (35). Yet there is much more behind the screen that is of interest.

## Hypertext

Researchers in new media use layering as a common metaphor to describe relationships in digital texts. Manovich notes that “a digital image consists of a number of separate layers” (229) that are added, manipulated, and deleted separately. The image is a montage of the individual layers. Daniel Anderson and Jentery Sayers extend the metaphor by observing that a photo editing tool gives the user a way to add filters and or adjust opacity to turn up the presence of one layer or deemphasize another (84). No layer dominates, or, as Jay David Bolter says, there is no “privileged element . . . no single topic that dominates all the others” (34).

This layering metaphor, when applied to a web-based hypertext, combined with Kirschenbaum’s call for looking beyond the essentialism of the screen allows us to expose the underlying computer code that makes up the page and the processes and hardware that bring it to the screen. To continue the metaphor, we are then decreasing the opacity of the screen layer to

expose the code layer to the naked eye. Rosemarie Coste looks at how the screen and source code interact with each other in “Hypertextual Ultrastructures: Movement and Containment in Texts and Hypertexts.” *Ultrastructure* is a term from cellular biology that Coste appropriates to describe a different concept than *infrastructure*. The infrastructure for a hypertext supports the hypertext by providing shared resources for hypertexts. The analogy used by Coste is the infrastructure of the city that “provides shared resources such as streets, power lines, and emergency rescue services” (5-6). In digital terms, these are things like the operating system, the network switches, the cables, and the hosting server and display device. This is larger than the structure and “we cannot see it as a whole because it is so much bigger than we are” (6). On the other hand, “ultra” means something smaller, so an ultrastructure would be smaller than the structure. In the context of the hypertext, the ultrastructure is the supporting, unseen textual structure underneath a hypertext document. Like the infrastructure, it cannot be seen but its effects can be observed and, with the right tools, it can be investigated directly (6).

“[The ultrastructure] is located in the space between the screen and the hardware, in the software-controlled realm that transforms the binary digits stored in hardware into the words, images, and sounds experienced by human users” (8).

Looking at the ultrastructure gives a view into the “how” of the webpage, and looking at the infrastructure provides an opportunity to appreciate the physical aspects (Anderson and Sayers 89). Coste echoes the arguments of Eyman (delivery and storage elements of rhetoric) and Kirchenbaum (breaking the essentialism of the screen) that a better understanding of ultrastructure is important for the study of new media. The decaying ultrastructure—broken links, unmaintained software—can make hypertexts unavailable in the same way that iron-based

inks can decay paper documents. Although we see instances of hypertexts being copied from one server to another, if a hypertext exists on one server and is the target of a link on pages around the Internet, an issue with that server that makes the hypertext unavailable would be like instantly destroying every copy of a printed book wherever it might reside; conversely, correcting the server's issue and making the text available again would be like simultaneously restoring every destroyed copy (19). In this respect, "the digital is very much material, despite rhetorics and ideologies of cyberspace that suggest otherwise. The digital *rots*. It *decays*. It *degrades*" (Anderson and Sayers 89, italics in the original).

Other approaches have been proposed for examining source code through the lens of the humanities. Writing in *Electronic Book Review*, Mark Marino proposes the examination of source code as literature, calling the practice "Critical Code Studies" (CCS). Software, he argues, is a cultural practice of algorithms, human interaction, and the imagination. The code is not value-neutral. As a semiotic system, it can be explicated using theories from other semiotic systems. The code can be approached from an interpretive process that recognizes how it is situated within society and history.

CCS was applied in the creation of the eponymously named book *10 PRINT CHR\$(205.5+RND(1)); : GOTO 10*. This simple program—wholly contained in the book's title—was written for the Commodore 64, an early entrant in the personal computer market. Montfort et al. break the code down one token at a time, considering how the program works while pointing out that PRINT in Commodore BASIC does not produce a physical output on paper, but the interface to the original implementation of BASIC was a Teletype that used physical paper for output (10-11). The output of this program is a maze, and this output is

compared to mazes in the physical world as well as mazes within early computer games such as *Adventure* (33-45).

John David Zuern links the perception of the significance of a text to its material interface, arguing that we look at a digital text differently than a physical text, but we should “embrace electronic literature to make curatorial as well as critical commitments to these culturally vital but materially precarious artifacts.” Zuern describes the digital text *My Name is Captain, Captain*, which is written in the compiled language Flash where the source code is not visible and contrasts that with the work *exquisite\_code* that publishes the underlying Python source as well as the visible text. To use Coste’s terminology, *exquisite\_code* explicitly exposes its ultrastructure, while *Captain, Captain* explicitly obfuscates it.

Coste offers an example where the same visual display, black words in a blue box, are created in three different ways using a combination of images, HTML, and CSS (140-46). This shows the ways that the container can make a rhetorical statement about the visual text, because the author of the web page, through the page structure, is indicating the relative importance of each part of the page: the words on the page, the imagery, or some combination of both. Coste argues the interplay of the containers and the contained—the structure—is significant for study, not unlike the way that Montfort et al. surface the code of *10 PRINT* for critical analysis.

Since modern HTML is defined as an XML document with specific content, HTML exhibits the same rhetorical nature as XML. J.D. Applen and Rudy McDaniel consider both the structural and visual rhetorical aspects of XML. “[T]hings derive their meaning by how they are situated in relationship to other things” (95). Structure brings order to data, yet there is no inherent structure to data, and a structure must be applied to it. Data gains structure when placed

within a well-designed classification system. Applen and McDaniel offer the example used by Foucault in *The Order of Things* where animals are divided into categories that include “embalmed” and “belonging to the Emperor” (98). The system fails because an animal might be alive and owned by a common person and otherwise fall outside of the other 11 categories mentioned.

The use of classification systems will be important when I examine the source code for certain pages on the websites included in this research. Without access to the source code for the application that generated the page or to the designers of that code, the page must be reverse-engineered by its structure to uncover the classification system being used for the visible text on the webpage. How the text blocks relate to one another gives insight into the importance of the text, and that relationship is made through a system of classification.

While both humans and computers can make meaning of well-classified and structured data, the human user must have a different representation of data than the computer, one that carries its own rhetorical content. The “lack of visual sophistication [in XML code] is rhetorically damaging when XML information must be interpreted or examined by a human user rather than a computer” and the visual aspect can have a direct impact on the ethos of the website (Applen and McDaniel 136). The visual format of the data may not accurately represent the data on the webpage, as is seen when a font selected to display game titles does not match the artistic style of all of the games included on the page, and even the process of converting the page from its full color representation on the web to grayscale for the book has a rhetorical effect (160-161).

Both Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) and the XML Stylesheet Language (XSL) can be used to format XML files. In web applications, XSL would be used to transform data into HTML at the webserver and would not be visible to the end user. CSS, on the other hand, is interpreted by the reader's computer and applied to the webpage within the browser. How CSS is used for the display aspects of an HTML tag can also offer clues to the purpose of the data within that tag and help determine the relationship of that data to other data within the page.

### Discourse Analysis

Janice “Ginny” Redish posits that a website is a dialogue between the author and the reader, a conversation built around a scenario and a persona of the reader (29-36). Viewed through this lens, concepts of discourse analysis can bring to light how a website projects identity and conveys meaning to the reader. This view is supported by Zappen, who notes that “dialogue—conceived not as a mode of persuasion, but as a testing of one's own ideas, a contesting of others' ideas, and a collaborative creating of ideas—is possible in any medium: oral, print, digital” (320-21).

Gee develops a concept of discourse analysis that crosses media boundaries in *Unified Discourse Analysis*. The “unified,” in this case, is a unification of techniques used for both the real world and the virtual. Gee uses ideas and terminology from video games to apply to his concepts. Of particular interest here is the concept of the “avatar.” In video games, an avatar is a character that the player can control. Avatars have distinct capabilities that are not necessarily aligned to the capabilities of the human player and therefore they act as a *surrogate body* for the player in the game (17). An avatar has a distinct “*identity* that the player inhabits” 18; emphasis

in the original). This identity is enacted or played by the player, for example, the identity or avatar of Lara Croft is played by the player in *Tomb Raider*. The avatar's capabilities remain that of Lara Croft, a female, even if the player is male. Finally, the avatar is a collection of tools or a toolkit that the player can use to play the game, solve problems, and achieve objectives within the game (18).

Avatars can be extended to the real world, where the identities or roles that people have or enact are analogous to the avatars in a video game. One person may enact avatars, "at different times and places, as an executive, a husband, a biker, a hip-hop fan, a gamer, and an African-American of a certain sort" (19-20). A person is enabled or constrained in their interaction with the world in a specific situation based on the avatar or identity the person enacts (20).

Althusser suggested the term *interpellation* to describe the way "[i]ndividuals are . . . placed in certain positions by particular ways of talking" (Jørgensen and Phillips 40). Laclau and Mouffe apply the term *subject positions* within the discourse and remove the economic ties that Althusser applies to discourse (Jørgensen and Phillips 40). The subject positions of Laclau and Mouffe have a general equivalence to Gee's avatars.

A contrasting approach to identity in discourse comes from the discursive psychology approach presented by Marianne Jørgensen and Louise Phillips. Describing the discursive psychology model put forth by Potter and Wetherell, people in a discourse are not categorized as avatars or by subject position. Rather, categories (avatars/subject positions) are identified through the discursive practice or the social interaction (107-09).

The concept of the avatar is one that is particularly interesting. When playing an avatar in a game, for example, Lara Croft in *Tomb Raider*, the identity of the person playing the avatar is both irrelevant and unknown. A church's website ideally will reflect the identity of the church. The designers and maintainers, whether staff and volunteers with experience in technology or the theological leadership of the church, must have the ability to inhabit this avatar and correctly "play the role" in order to reflect the ethos of the church correctly.

### Technical Communications

Rhetoric is an important part of website design and should concern all web writers, whether authoring a church website or communicating technical information. J.D. Appen observes that the distance between the author of the webpage and the reader requires the author to consider how rhetoric must be an integral component of any website:

When we produce Web sites, we cannot count on people seeing what we are wearing or hearing our mellifluous voices as we speak, and they will not see the expressions of concern or warmth on our faces. We can theorize, however, about how effective choice of words and sound logic better allow us to produce a successful message because they have enhanced our ethos; people respect and believe us. (179)

Ethos, which includes the reader's (or hearer's) perception of the ethics of the rhetor, is both of situated and invented. The invented ethos is established by the rhetor, and situated ethos—an established ethos that a person or organization has in the mind of the website reader—comes initially from invented ethos (180). How a church constructs its website will affect the reader's perception of ethos. The concept of "church" has an ethos in the mind of a believer



because the church is one specific instance of a worship community, but the ethos of that specific church must show through its website in order for the visitor to have confidence in that church's relevance for his or her religious practice.

A discourse community for a website is created by the authors and the readers. Appen builds on the work of James Porter to provide a mechanism for thinking about the discourse community that looks at author, audience, subject, and rhetorical approach (193-96). The rhetorical approach, or, in Porter's terms, "how does the author say/write it?", must account for the medium. Writing for the web is different than writing for print.

Effectively writing for the web is the focus of Redish's *Letting Go of the Words: Writing Web Content that Works*. Offering practical suggestions for audience analysis, website design, navigation, and content construction, Redish's approach to creating a website is a useful compendium of advice for the website author that is accessible to the fledgling writer as well as the technical communications professional. Letting go of the words goes beyond "Cut! Cut! Cut! And cut again!" (132). A website should get to the point and eliminate unnecessary content.

Church websites frequently have multiple audiences: the current members, the prospective members, and other churches (though the latter is usually an audience that is not a direct target). The authors must consider these as separate personas and write accordingly. From a critical standpoint, the church websites can be analyzed based upon how well they address these personas and how well they use the key concepts put forth by Redish.

How well the website acts as an information source is important for church sites as much as a site for technical documentation, Wikipedia, or a news site. The church is publishing information about its culture, affiliations, activities, and events. Therefore, its information

architecture is an integral part of determining its success. The same information architecture that is used to create a book or other printed document does not apply for a website. A book has a top-down, hierarchical order as seen through its table of contents. Pages follow one another linearly, constrained by the physical nature of the book. A website and webpages are not under the same constraints. “The essential architectural feature of the Web is that every page is a peer of every other page” (Baker 51). On sites like Amazon and Wikipedia, the reader rarely, if ever, will enter the site through the homepage and navigate downward through a top-down hierarchy. Rather, the reader will use a search engine to enter the site below the home page, then move from page to page in a sideways fashion rather than from the top down (51). For this reason, Baker argues, websites should be structured to treat every page as if it were the first page the reader sees. If the site is built assuming a homepage-centric model, a reader will quickly become frustrated trying to navigate sideways.

This also means that each page should cover one topic and no others; links can be provided to related topics, and the page should cover the topic at one level only: more detailed or more general information should be covered on other pages (150-52, 157-59). Baker calls this “Every Page Is Page One” topic design, or EPPO topic design. It is a different way of organizing text than in print. The canonical order for a printed text is starting at the first page and proceeding, line by line, to the last page in a linear fashion. A preferred hierarchical order of the information is fixed in the sequence of pages as defined by the author. Alternative hierarchies are possible by including indices, tables of contents, reference tables, and glossaries. These alternatives are more difficult for the reader, who must first look to the source for the alternative hierarchy (e.g., the reference table), locate the page, read the information, and then return to the

hierarchy to identify the next piece of information and its location. Multiple paths are an integral part of a website, as these alternate hierarchies—usually created by using additional pathway pages (Redish 94)—are as easily navigated by the reader as the author’s “preferred” hierarchy (Bolter 31-32, 100-01).

Can EPPO concepts apply outside of the field of technical communications? The technical communicator’s goal is to write with the purpose of delivering information that is concise, understandable, and relevant for that medium. A church would have similar goals; relevant information would include the church, its beliefs, organization, and affiliations. This may not always be clear to the outsider because of terminology. For example, a “session” in the Presbyterian church is the group of elders responsible for leading a congregation. This differs from the definition most would first call to mind, a meeting or a period of time, as in the statement, “Congress was in session through the weekend to complete unfinished business.” The same techniques that explain the operation of a radio telescope can be used to explain Presbyterian polity or the interpretation of scripture written in 17th century King James English.

### Religion and the Internet

Heidi Campbell observes that religion has been a part of the online environment since the days of bulletin board systems (BBS) in the 1980s, yet it was not until 2000 that the first academic text of significance on religion and the Internet was published. There is research into the effect of the Internet on social practices and how computer-mediated communications (CMC) are used in the home for religious purposes; more than half surveyed by Pew Research reported using the Internet for religious activities. Campbell asserts that we derive valuable insights from

the study of the Internet and religion “by asking standard questions in interesting ways” (“Making Space for Religion in Internet Studies” 313).

The Internet is driving culture shift; in churches, we find “previously marginalized ‘techies’ with new leadership roles” are “new agents of authority” (“Making” 312). Technology specialists at churches are suddenly finding themselves as spokespersons for the church because of their control over the design and content of the website. The ability of these technologists to accurately portray the church, the community, and the beliefs often is highly dependent upon the support and oversight given to them, especially when they are volunteers. Technologists may color the message of the church as it moves online. If the technologists are not also educated in the church’s theology or have direction from the religious leaders, the message may be altered in ways that the church community did not intend (“Making” 312). Lynne Baab interviewed ten website maintainers to discover how their churches approached content creation for the web. It was remarkable, Baab said, that none of the interviewees had “any reservations about the possibility of accurately representing congregations on websites. . . . those people did not appear to be aware that discourse can construct reality as well as represent it” (151-52).

Study of religion and the Internet needs to look at the community of practice for key indicators of how the media affects religion or how religion affects the media. Campbell proposes a Social Shaping of Technology analytical framework that looks at the community’s history, traditions, and core beliefs. The community negotiates discourse in new media based on these foundations (*When Religion Meets New Media* 60-63). Communities may have one of four general reactions to incorporating new media in the community: acceptance, limitation or reconfiguration, rejection, or innovation (*When* 112-14). Campbell offers examples from the

three worldwide monotheistic religions. The Emerging Church (also referred to as the emergent church) is held up as an example of how a group's use of technology can provide organization and create authority. The Emerging Church actively uses technology such as blogs, forums and message boards, and online polling to build community that transcends the boundaries of the church and local community by including web-based interactive content (Baab 52-53, 157-58).

The way that a religious community interacts with technology is not always straightforward. From a Christian perspective, and particularly in the Evangelical denominations, new media has usually been totally embraced for its ability to spread the word of their beliefs to a wider audience. This goes back farther than modern media like radio, TV, and the Internet: Campbell observes that the Gutenberg press was "new media" when it was introduced and quickly embraced by the Reformation (*When* 136).

Lynne Baab examined how church websites present organizational identity through content analysis, rhetorical analysis and critical analysis of church websites. She divided churches into three categories: megachurch (more than 2,000 average attendance), vibrant liberal/mainline church, and emergent church (32-33, 35).

Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia informs Baab's conceptual framework for website authorship. A website has many authors, such as the graphics designer, the editor, and the content subject matter experts. Calling websites a "patchwork," she says that heteroglossia is visible "as website producers seek to balance the congregation's central voice with the diverse activities, opportunities and voices of members" (19-21). Tying this back to discourse analysis, the "congregation's central voice" is Gee's avatar in the discourse between church and reader, with multiple authors inhabiting the avatar.

Each type of church built their websites with different content. Megachurches tended to be “web first” with links to other pages on the church website. Mainline churches offered links to remediated content—newsletters, bulletins, etc.— presented as PDF for the web. They frequently linked to denominational resources. The emergent church websites focused on community and included links to blogs or discussion forums (52-53).

Baab’s rhetorical analysis focused on audience, genre, and heteroglossia. The churches reflected differences by category here as well. The megachurches presented a strict father model where the head of the family (leadership) maintains tight control over the message, but the message was one of a big, busy family. The mainline churches were built on the model of the nurturing parent with the member’s contributions recognized. The emergent church websites focused on individuality and the desire to build deep and meaningful relationships in a community with both physical and virtual presences (130-33).

Although there are similarities between Baab’s work and mine, the overlap is incomplete. The focus in “The Future Church” is on content and identity. The website is seen as a medium for transmission. She does not look at the ultrastructure or infrastructure. The attributes of the congregation’s image, for example, the “coffee house” of the emergent church, are important to Baab, but I focus on the consistency of the image presented through both the content and construction of the website. Finally, it should be noted that the research done by Baab is several years old and the technology changes over time will have affected many aspects of church website construction, including not only the technology but also theories of website design such as Baker’s EPPO.

In *Digital Jesus: The Making of a New Christian Fundamentalist*, Robert Glenn Howard traces the way that a community of practice consisting of Christian fundamentalists connect and engage in “ritual deliberation” about their faith, sharing ideas, interpretations, and analyses of the Bible and particularly End Times prophecy. Howard asserts that these communities of practice organized around independent websites, blogs and web-based discussion boards comprises a virtual church since it consists of people coming together to share their belief in Christ (172). This use of web technologies to foster conversation in the community parallels Baab’s observations of the emergent church’s use of online technologies to supplement face-to-face interaction (132-33).

Televangelists address an audience composed overwhelmingly of believers, yet they commonly speak as though the audience has not converted to Christianity. The conversion rhetoric provides the viewer with a way to perceive being part of a community and “provides the foundation on which this social reality is constructed by the evangelist and offered to the audience for legitimation” (Wright 739). Chris Wright describes televangelists who promote the prosperity gospel—a belief system that posits the true believer will be rewarded on earth as well as in heaven—have a common rhetorical device using the story of someone who is a Christian, falls into sin, comes back into the faith (a “reconversion,” if you will), then receives physical blessings after the restoration of faith (744-46).

By establishing the unconverted—whether physically or rhetorically present—as outside the group and potential community members, the community is provided both with an affirmation of their membership and a focus for efforts that continually reaffirm that membership. Even if a true non-believer is not physically (or virtually) present in the discussion,

one can observe how the rhetorical device of the non-believer can be used in both virtual and face-to-face discussions. In the case of church websites, as Baab has established, there are at least two audiences, with one consisting of non-members. A church might choose to use this rhetorical device, assume that non-members have not undergone conversion, and target the content of the website accordingly.

If we think of a church as a business, the business of the church is the construction of a community of believers. The decline in church attendance since the 1950s is a well-documented fact (see, for example, Attaway et al. 16-17 and R. Jones 46-47). The addressable market for congregants is shrinking and congregations must work harder to bring in new members. Therefore, it is logical to consider how applying marketing concepts to the promotion of the church can increase the church's business—that is, expand market penetration and increase the size of the church community. Attaway et al. analyze the preferences of potential churchgoers to suggest how the knowledge of demographics can be used to “tailor the attributes of the church to the needs and desires of its membership and make wise use of the limited resources that are available for ministry” (29). Their research found that there are elements in common across all groups: location, viewpoints, reputation, minister, congregation friendliness, and affiliation (28). Choices varied among the respondents in the programs that were important to the segments within each grouping. For example, women were more interested in programs that reached into the community than men were, but 18-22 year olds felt this was less important than older groups (24) This study was published in 1997, when 18-22 year olds would have been part of “Generation X.” Today, this age group would belong to the generation referred to as



“Millennials.” A study performed in the late 2010s might find this age group has different priorities (22).

The common attributes found align to the dimensions that I use to determine the churches that are included for study. The strong desire of respondents to find a church in a specific location means that there is relevance to consider how churches of different denominations and sizes located near each other attempt to communicate with potential members from the same geographical area. Smaller churches, with less manpower (staff and volunteers/members) and financial resources, must be more focused with the number and types of programs offered. If the way these are communicated on the website do not line up well with the market segments identified, the disconnect needs to be corrected for the church to more effectively attract and retain members.

### Summary

A complete view of the way churches communicate through their website requires incorporating research and ideas from multiple disciplines. The essential need of a church to bring in new members must use the media and methods that can best reach these prospective members and establish why that church community is the right one. In this way, the church must understand the consumer marketplace and recognize what the market desires. The church must also inform the existing members of the activities and business of the congregation and stimulate the members to investigate new ways to be a part of the community. The larger churches, the mainline denominations, and the emerging churches have a different focus from one another that can be used to observe how and to whom they communicate.

Technical communication offers practical advice for the planning and construction of websites that are effective in reaching their desired audience, whether that audience is looking for instructions to repair a ceiling fan or to research a church community. The techniques of writing concisely, with an eye toward audience and an understanding of how people find information on the web are not specific to technical communications and can be applied to any form of communications on the web.

The discourse not on the screen has interest because it can affect the discourse on the screen. To look at that underlying text and observe the intertextuality, it is necessary to understand how source code can be given a literary reading as well as how it behaves in shaping the screen text.

All elements—the communicating church, web composition, hypertext theory, and discourse—are important in the describing the way churches communicate through their websites. In the next chapter, I will take a closer look at the visible website, the projected message, and the way a church communicates directly to the reader via the webpage.

## CHAPTER THREE: ETHOS AND AUDIENCE

### Introduction

Between September 23 and October 8, 2016, I visited the websites for each of the eight churches in this study several times. I examined every page that was available through the main menu structure and any pages that were linked from those pages. I considered the potential audiences for the pages, the effectiveness of the organization and visual presentation of the information, and the source HTML and CSS when appropriate (this will be discussed further in Chapter 4).

The menu structure for the site was used as the primary navigation for my exploration. Although Mark Baker (10-11) notes that the usual way we look for information is to search for it, menus have three very useful functions: they reveal the content of the site, they indicate how to use the site, and they give the site visitor confidence in the site publisher (Krug 63). The menus also indicate the emphasis the churches placed on the information and give insight into the visitor personas imagined by the content designers and providers.

Through this chapter, I will describe pages using the page name as displayed at the top of the page and provide a reference to the page through the menu hierarchy. This is done because not all pages consistently used the menu entry name as the page name. For the menu hierarchy, the reference will be enclosed in double angle brackets and an arrow pointing right will separate the menu selections. For example, «Next Steps→Grouplife» would indicate that the page is located by selecting *Next Steps* from the main menu, then selecting *Grouplife* from the secondary menu beneath it. The References section contains citations for all of the church websites used in

this study, including the Uniform Resource Locator (URL). If the page referenced is not from the church website's menu, it will be noted in the text and a separate citation provided.

In classical rhetoric, *ethos* was the effect of the personal character of the rhetor on the listener's perception of the credibility of the rhetor. The rhetor's appearance, status, bearing, and voice all contributed to the ethos he or she projected to the listener. How does a church establish ethos in a virtual space? In the absence of face-to-face contact or a physical visit to the church, the visitor to the website must decide through the context of the website itself if the church is worth visiting and potentially joining. The church could establish this by displaying their connections to other churches, referencing community organizations with which they work, presenting the church leadership as competent leaders who are people of God, or showing they take their presence on the web as a serious endeavor that is as important as maintaining the physical church itself.

## Ethos

For denominational churches, the matter of showing that they are a member of a group is easier than for a non-denominational church. Forest Hills United Methodist Church needs to establish ethos this way in particular because of its size. It makes the connection to the greater UMC denomination immediately when the page loads for the visitor. Not only is "United Methodist Church" fully spelled out in the church's name and displayed in 40 pixel high characters in the header, the denomination's cross-and-flame logo is right next to it and a smaller version is the favicon (the icon in the browser tab) for the site. St. Luke's UMC, though much larger, incorporates "United Methodist Church" into its logo. St. Luke's has worked hard to

create a consistent identity in the website, so this logo is on every page and incorporated into the branding of some of the groups in the church («Grow→Youth»). The sidebar menu on the «Contact» page includes links to the denomination’s homepage, the Florida Conference homepage, and the Florida Conference East Central District homepage, clearly delineating that this church has ties at multiple levels. Lakeside Fellowship also brings in elements from the denomination. Their logo also includes “United Methodist Church.” The UMC logo and link to the denomination is in the «New Here?→About Us» page.

Van Dyke Church distances itself from the denomination. The website mentions “Methodist” three times, once on «New Here?» and twice on «New Here?→Plan Your Visit». The denomination logo does not appear at all; there is no link to the denomination’s website; the denomination name is not in the church’s name. Van Dyke fails to establish an organizational ethos in the traditional manner for a church affiliated with a denomination and must rely upon other means such as the way the church displays values associated with traditional Christianity such as a pastor with seminary training, a message that has a strong link to the New Testament, and symbols of Christianity in the graphics and photography on the website.

Grace Family Church and Northland display connectivity via other means than the denominational links. Even though they are independent churches, they each have ties to other churches. Grace Family church is a member of the Association of Related Churches (ARC). The ARC’s website indicates that the association is composed of churches that “provide support, guidance and resources” to other churches (“Association of Related Churches”). Grace Family has placed the ARC logo in the footer of their page design to indicate the connection, but they do not describe in detail the way they participate in the ARC. Northland describes their connectivity

in a sense more theological than pragmatic, “a network of spiritual families” where the “relationships form the church” («About»). In Northland’s terms, the need for connection is existential and deliberate.

Acacia Grove, a smaller, younger church than the two large non-denominational congregations, attempts to establish a similar form of connection. Unlike Grace Family and Northland, they do not list specifics. They state, “We aim to give half of our tithes and offerings to those who are in need and to become a church planting church” («Explore→About AGC»). Their outreach ministry does not show connections to local organizations («Serve→CARE+CONNECT»). One would need to visit the church to verify their commitment to service and outreach to the community. The church may have overlooked the need to include these connections, in which case the missing information is an oversight and should not detract from the ethos established by their determination to support work outside the church. Smaller churches do not have to be disadvantaged in this way. Forest Hills, possibly the smallest church in this study, operates a food pantry that “is part of a Federal program” («Missions→Shepherds Way Food Pantry»). Lakeside Fellowship lists projects where they work with other organizations in their local area («Serve→Outreach»).

Van Dyke relies on the connection to non-church organizations locally and globally to replace the denominational connection they have deemphasized. The page «Next Steps→Serve» indicates they work with Metropolitan Ministries, a well-known ecumenical aid group in Tampa Bay. The «Next Steps→Missions») page lists 23 specific groups they work with in service to others.

Churches can establish or enhance situated ethos through their presentation of their clergy and staff. None of the churches I studied went so far as to put the pastor prominently on their home page. This would have very closely tied the ethos of the pastor and the church. Each church had a different approach to the presentation of their clergy, from an extensive formal, distant third-person presentation to no information at all.

Northland offers a biography and curriculum vitae for their senior pastor, Joel Hunter («About→Senior Pastor»). The biography is written in third person and refers to him as “Dr. Hunter.” It emphasizes his connections and work outside Northland. Its only mention is in the first paragraph, stating he came to Northland in 1985 and that the church has grown 100-fold during his 31 years at the church. The language and the extensive list of international connections, awards, degrees, and published books is used to elevate Hunter above the common person. He is presented as a public figure, without mention of spouse, family, or personal hobbies. The photograph that accompanies the biography is also formal, showing the pastor dressed in a dark suit with tie and standing in front of a bookcase. The projected effect is that this is a powerful, learned man, a leader, and the church’s reputation is enhanced by their long association. This would appeal to a certain type of visitor, although not someone who would like to have a close relationship with the senior pastor or see him sitting on the chancel steps surrounded by young children and delivering a children’s sermon.

St. Luke’s biography of their senior pastor is also written in the third person. The description of her and her accomplishments is markedly different in word choice and formality than Northland’s description of Dr. Hunter. She is first called “Pastor Jenn” and then referred to as “Jenn” with no honorific. The softer, more casual voice and the use of a diminutive of her first

name project an air of accessibility that is not found in Hunter's biography on Northland's web site. In addition to her education and background, the biography highlights her spiritual gifts, her family, and her interests («Contact→Staff→The Rev. Jennifer Stiles Williams»). Van Dyke Church takes a similar approach. They accentuate the casualness by showing the pastor in blue jeans, t-shirt, and pullover sweater with the sleeves pushed up, hands on hips, and looking at the camera with an open, engaging smile. They include a link to his personal blog («New Here?→Meet the Pastor»). They establish through the education credentials that the pastor has sufficient knowledge of theology to lead the church, but show the pastor as accessible and interested in all of the members.

Lakeside Fellowship's presentation of their pastor, Rev. Cameron Lashbrook, presents more of his personality through the use of interview-style questions with answers written by Lashbrook in the first person. The voice of the pastor comes through, offering a glimpse into his style of writing and his personal focus. The photograph that is part of the text is similarly casual: he is wearing jeans and short-sleeve polo shirt in an outdoors setting («New Here?→Staff»).

Grace Family, the Tampa megachurch, lists their lead pastor, Craig Altman, at the top of the page that includes all of the church staff («New Here→Pastors & Staff»). The listing itself is has a rhetorical impact due to its length; there are 111 entries. Each staff member's listing includes a picture, their name, title, and email address. No additional information is included for the staff members, so beyond this basic contact information the visitor has no insight into the person. The picture, though showing casual attire, is a traditional head-and-shoulders shot with the subject smiling into the camera. The email addresses are not hyperlinks; to email Altman, the



address has to be copied into the email program of choice. The pastor adds little or no ethos if the visitor is not familiar with him through another medium.

At the opposite end from Northland is Acacia Grove. The church does not list the clergy on any page of their site. By omitting the pastor and staff, the focus is totally on the congregation of the church. Acacia Grove projects a different ethos than the other churches that is unique and possibly appealing to a certain segment of Christians looking for a new church where the members lead in doing the work of the church. The church misses an excellent opportunity to reinforce this since they do not have any pictures on their website. The specialness of the congregation-led church would be strengthened by including pictures of the congregation engaged in service work.

The final way of establishing the church's ethos that I will consider is the appearance of the website. In the physical world, the appearance and upkeep of the church building offers an insight into the health of the church; a building with faded carpet and water stains may indicate a church that is in poor financial condition or where the members are unable to repair or contract repairs to the facility. The website is the church's virtual presence and is a proxy for the physical building for the website visitor.

The website for Forest Hills is indicative of a church with limited resources. The information on the website is current and the calendar is being maintained. The homepage offers a PayPal link for donations. The visual design is somewhat dated; the header uses a graphic for the church name and mission statement where the text is noticeably pixelated, and the footer has a copyright statement dated 2012, which is likely when the design was published. Finally, the design is not responsive, in other words, it does not adjust based on the size of the browser

window to accommodate different devices such as smart phones and tablets. Of the eight churches considered here, it is the only one that does not have a responsive, mobile-friendly design.

A website design can be modern, attractive, and responsive in behavior yet still there may still be issues that detract from the experience and affect the ethos. Lakeside Fellowship's page for children's ministry contains heading text in a light green (RGB code 153, 204, 0) that does not occur on any other page. This text has a smaller line height than the rest of the text on the page. This disconnect from the rest of the site does not appear to be related to the text or the subject. It is likely a content author who did not understand the importance of consistent design and messaging.



Figure 1: Text inconsistencies on Lakeside Fellowship's Children's Ministry page  
Source: <http://lakesidefellowship.org/childrensministry/>, 9 Oct. 2016.

Large churches are not immune to issues that affect the usability of the website and can change the impression the visitor has of the church. Van Dyke's modern, responsive design is attractive and appealing. The author of the CSS code that drives the appearance of the website failed to check the way the design behaves when the width is reduced to a limit before the mobile design takes over (Figure 2). Between about 769 and 1080 pixels wide on a non-mobile browser, the navigation bar is partially covered by the large "Give" button and the "Next Online Experience" counter. The "Events" menu item has wrapped and overlaps the top of the footer. The footer contact information and the call-to-action links overlap.

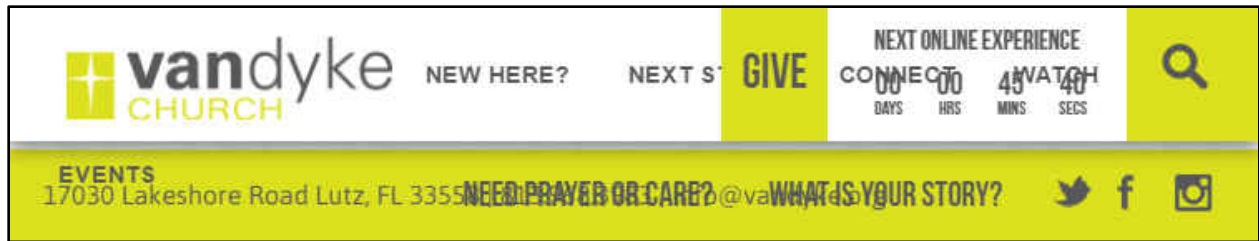


Figure 2: Van Dyke Church navigation bar and footer at 769 pixel width  
 Source: <http://vandyke.org>, 9 Oct. 2016.

Lakeside Fellowship's formatting issues and Van Dyke's design issues are both easily correctable. They detract from the user experience and are inconsistent with what visitors have come to expect based on their usage of large e-commerce websites. The ethos of the church is impacted as a result.

### Audience

Establishing ethos is most important for the church website in order to attract and retain visitors who are not members of the church. Church members presumably accept the situated ethos of the church from their personal experiences in the church. The church website, as previously discussed, has two primary audiences, visitors and members, and a third secondary audience of other churches. In this section, I will review the ways that the websites have addressed the two primary audiences and how the websites balance the content between each audience.

### *Visitors*

Website visitors looking for a church will come to find basic information about the church such as the location and the time of the services. They may also be looking for guidance

on attire, service format, and the theology of the church. This information should be easy to locate on the home page, which has a high probability of being the first page the visitor lands on even when reaching it via a search engine. How quickly and easily the visitor can find this information indicates how valuable the church considers this audience. Every church I examined has made this information accessible, although the method varies. GracePointe's home page is filled with a picture of the building where they meet. They proclaim in all uppercase letters "JOIN US" with a "Find us on the map" button below. The service information is lower on the page, but since the picture completely fills the window regardless of the dimensions, it is easy for a visitor to think that there is nothing on the page but the picture of the building and the menu of options. Forest Hills and St. Luke's put the location in the page header, and the St. Luke's header includes the worship times. Service times and a welcome message overlay the Van Dyke hero image, but the address is in the footer. Acacia Grove has a prominent box marked "Times & Location" that is part of the page footer and appears on every page. Their overall website design is open and sparse and lends itself to this approach, and the essential "when and where" is consolidated into a single topic page.

Another common technique used by the churches is to consolidate the information they believe is important for visitors looking for a church into one page or menu category. This is often marked "New Here" or "I'm New." Five of the churches followed this pattern. Northland and GracePointe had an "About" menu category with information for the visitor, and Acacia Grove's menu category was labeled "Explore," asking the visitor to perform a virtual exploration of the church much like one would walk around the physical church. However, it could be argued that visitors who have some experience with church websites might see the inclusion of

“New” in the category as a signpost in the same way that the design of the page has certain signposts (Krug 64-65). Since people skim and scan a page (Redish 4), someone could easily overlook the Explore category while looking for “New” or “About.” The potential new member might dismiss the church from consideration in the belief that the information the visitor sought was not present or in the lack of desire to dig out the information. It violates Krug’s first rule of web usability, “Don’t make me think,” and indicates the church did not consider the visitor “persona” or the scenario of a visitor looking for basic church information (Krug 11; Redish 29-34).

The position of the category in the menu can make a statement about the church’s relationship to the audience. Krug notes that users will “satisfice,” and typically take the first option that matches their scan for keywords (22-25). GracePointe’s About category is the first one in its main menu, but the third on Northland’s, after “Connect” and “Resources.” A visitor might see the Northland menu and think “I want to *connect* with Northland, so I will choose that option.” A visitor would find valuable information about the church on this page, but the visitors may not locate the information they seek (at the time I viewed the page, the above-the-fold topics included links to three events, a blog, two recorded sermons, and the page with locations and times).

Below the homepage, the visitor can find additional information about the church. Common menu entries might include “Welcome,” “What to Expect,” and “History.” The ideal pages would address any questions visitors might have while and draw them into the dialogue as an active participant. This is something that even the smallest of churches can do as well as the largest. Forest Hills’ page is written in the form of an Internet FAQ. They consistently address

the reader in second person and somewhat less consistently use first person plural to describe the church. Their call to action is at the end of the page and takes the form of an invitation to contact the office, including phone number and a hyperlinked email address («Newcomers»).

In contrast, Van Dyke has an interactive “Plan Your Visit” page with large icons that the visitor can select to bring up different pieces of information. Although easier to navigate than the Forest Hills website, the dialogue with the visitor is less intimate. The church uses first-person plural, but alternates between second and third person for the visitor. For example, they use “most visitors access our location” instead of “you can enter the parking lot.” Van Dyke loses sight of their audience completely at one point: “Pastor Matthew loves to meet new people! If you are a guest, please stop in at Guest Central . . .” («New Here?→Plan Your Visit»). “Come by Guest Central after the service and meet Pastor Matthew” would be more of a conversation between the church and visitor. The call to action is a button marked “fill out the form,” but “let us know you’re coming” is more open and informs the readers of the button’s value to them.

St. Luke’s also has a “Plan Your Visit” page. Using accordion-style buttons that show a section of hypertext when pressed, they list six steps for planning a visit, from choosing a time to giving feedback after the visit. The only lapse from a conversational “we/you” tone is in the description of the services. The page invites the visitor to contact the church five times, reinforcing their openness to continuing the dialogue («I’m New→Plan Your Visit»).

Northland presents the example of a shifting speaker on its “Welcome” page, which is found at «About→New to Northland?»). The first half of the page consistently speaks as “we” to mean the church itself. The second half of the page is an FAQ where one answer reads, “Not taking up an offering during the worship service is a reminder to us that our giving is an

extension of our worship. . . .Northland strongly supports the biblical principle of tithing.” If the speaker is not the church, who is the “us” in the first part of the quote?

In general, however, the voice of the church is seen in pages where the direct audience is the seeker or the potential new member with the more conversational approach and the use of direct address. There is one general exception to this. Six of the eight churches supply a statement of belief, usually named “What We Believe.” This page was always written in a more formal voice. Three formats were used:

- A list of statements that all start off “We believe . . .” and optionally end with a Biblical citation. This was the format adopted by the two small non-denominational churches, GracePointe and Acacia Grove (GracePointe «About→Who We Are>>; Acacia Grove «Explore→What We Believe»).
- The formal mission statement followed by sections describing the vision and values of the congregation. The two larger Methodist churches, St. Luke’s and Van Dyke, used this format (St. Luke’s «I’m New→What We Believe»; Van Dyke «New Here?→What We Believe»). Northland uses this form at the start of their page, but continues with the third form for the remainder («<<About→Beliefs and Mission»).
- Sections of the page starting with headings such as “God,” “The Bible,” and “Man” that have an explanation and optional biblical citations. Grace Family used this form («New Here→What We Believe»).

The two small Methodist churches did not have a page of this type. Neither they nor the larger Methodist churches offered a link to the denomination’s section that explained the foundational beliefs and documents (“Basics of Our Faith”).



## *Members*

Each of the churches addresses the newcomer or visitor as a primary audience in one or more pages. This primacy is clearly exhibited by identifying one main menu item, usually the first, as the area that visitors can find information specific to them. Current members need to find information about the church that goes beyond worship times and locations. They will want to discover events outside of worship or small group meetings, sign up to volunteer in church activities, or send in an offering. The website should establish a conversation with this audience in a way that keeps them engaged and active participants.

Grace Family primarily focuses on the members of the congregation through the remainder of the website. Although one menu category is entitled “Next Steps,” the secondary menu provides information on attending or leading one of their small groups that are available for different segments of their congregation. Redish would describe the first page in this section as a “pathway” page in that it is more a link to other pages than the final landing point for information using pictures and short segments of text (94-98). The pathways filter the master list of groups into the category selected: by gender, marital status, age, or spiritual need («Next Steps→Groups»).

The subtitle of their “Watch a Message” page is directed toward the members: “Watch a message live, one you may have missed, or share with someone else” («Watch→Messages»). The implication in “one you may have missed” is that the reader of the page regularly attends or watches online and is not a first-time visitor to the website. The final clause, “share with someone else,” is likely less about social sharing as a friend would do with a short online video and more about evangelizing someone since the videos are full-length sermons.

The GFC “Campuses” section attempts to balance between both audiences. The second-level pages are for each of the five campuses for the church. Basic details such as address and service time could be of use to either audience, but it may be that GFC expects the first-time visitor to be the primary audience, because the same list that can be found on their “What to Expect” page is copied verbatim to each campus page. Campus events from the calendar are shown as a list at the bottom of the page and are likely of more value to the current members.

St. Luke’s menu organization clearly addresses the congregation more than the visitor. After the “I’m New” section the site has ten menu sections. Five are action verbs that correspond to St. Luke’s five areas of focus: worship, connect, grow, serve, and commit. The other five cover online giving, a blog, the events calendar, an A-Z guide for ministries, and a contact form. The areas of focus at St. Luke’s are coded by colors that transcend the medium. Print, such as their weekly Ministry Guide (bulletin), has one page for each area and the page has the same color codes as the website menus. This coordination of media is useful to the members of the congregation more than a visitor, who might think that the website colors were chosen for variety, not for identification.

St. Luke’s is explicit in addressing the audience in the five focus area sections. For example, the “Serve” page opens saying, “A St. Luker serves” («Serve»). This nickname for the church members can be found throughout each section, usually as a form of direct address. Of the eight churches, St. Luke’s is the most consistent in identifying the audience for the page either directly or indirectly through the way the audience is addressed.

Of the eight sites, Northland alone places more emphasis on addressing the existing members than potential visitors. Although Northland has visitor information available as

discussed previously, the lack of a dedicated menu item or homepage block for the visitor and the ordering of the menus makes the visitor hunt for information about the church beyond locations and service times. Northland describes themselves as “the church distributed,” and the website’s organization may be a result of the church intentionally attempting to turn a visitor into a virtual worshipper through the live video stream. This would make them part of the distributed Northland by the church’s definition. In other words, the church may be taking the position that no one is a visitor.

### Summary

One might argue that a church has an inherent situated ethos by the mere fact of being a place of worship. If true, all churches are on level ground with respect to one another and can best differentiate themselves through invented ethos. The UMC churches have an advantage through the connection to their denomination, but Van Dyke downplays this to the point that one must read carefully to find that it is a Methodist church. Even the large non-denominational churches took advantage of their relationship to other churches to increase their invented ethos.

The larger Orlando churches established their pastors as the “sage on the stage,” although St. Luke’s moved toward a softer presentation than Northland’s very formal biography. More generally, the churches other than Northland and Acacia Grove tried to show their pastor as competent but accessible, the type of person that is one to whom anyone could relate.

The ethos established by the visual appearance of the website was similar across all churches except Forest Hills. The modern designs with support for mobile browsers helped reinforce an impression of relevance and competence. Some lapses in maintaining the design

were seen on nearly all the websites. The sites had only a small number of these lapses, if any, and they did not significantly detract from the overall impression of the website. Some might be unnoticed by the casual visitor and only are apparent to a practiced observer.

Comparing across denominations, locations, and church sizes, the websites have more similarities than differences in their approach to the audience. Large sites may have a greater amount of information, but in general they have organized their websites to make it easy for the first-time visitor to the website to find the basic information about the congregation, with Northland being the significant exception. The clear primary audience, regardless of denomination, size, and location, is the new member, the visitor, the seeker. More content on the site may address the existing member, but the content is not as obviously focused on that audience. St. Luke's makes a significant exception that is only apparent after looking closely at the total site: their color-coded menus with specific wording tie directly to language and colors that will have special meaning for the "St. Luker" than the visitor.

## CHAPTER FOUR: HYPERTEXT AND ORGANIZATION

In this chapter, I will review the subject church websites from the perspective of a technical communicator and web designer. Beyond ethos and attention to the audience, an effective website must be usable for the visitor. It should engage the visitor in a conversation. Many churches today have incorporated elements from the entertainment world in their services: lighting, staging, and video are common even in the smallest churches. They bring these elements in to bridge the gap between the world outside the church and the world inside the church. Multimedia engages the worshipper through different senses and brings the worshipper more fully into the worship experience.

The website for a church can extend this approach to the virtual world. A modern design that is similar to commercial websites will provide a bridge between the secular and sacred worlds. Writing for the web and in a hypertext environment requires a different approach than writing for print. It is no longer enough to post links to PDF documents and expect visitors to the website to become visitors to the church.

The site design should meet visitors on their level and make it easy for them to discover what a church offers. It should do this in the web's modern context, where an increasing number of people access information primarily through mobile devices. It should do this with the goal of making information easier to identify and index for search engines that are becoming the primary way for people to find and filter the content they are interested in. It should offer a multimedia experience when possible just like their worship services do so that the virtual visitor gains a deeper knowledge of the church. It should allow for easy navigation once on the site so that

visitors do not become disoriented or discouraged and leave. Finally, it should offer content that is written for the scanning-and-skimming web reader and is direct, brief, and organized well.

## Page Design

Two developments in website design have emerged in recent years in response to the growing use of the Internet. The first is the explosion of mobile platforms such as smart phones and tablets as access devices and the advances in the Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) language to support multiple target formats. No longer is a mobile design optional; the website's design must address mobile as well as desktop devices in a "responsive" design that adapts to the user. Additional pressure for change was applied to website designers when Google announced that their ranking algorithm from April 2015 would de-prioritize pages that were not designed to work well in a mobile context ("Make sure your site's ready for mobile-friendly Google search results"). All eight churches have a mobile design, verified by visiting each site from an iPhone 6 smart phone running iOS 10.0.2 and the Safari web browser.

The second driving force is the evolution of HTML to support additional semantic markers and give more clues of the function of sections of a webpage to search engine spiders and web browsers. After table-based layout gave way to layout using `<div>` tags, website designers started to use the `class` attribute as a place to include additional information about the enclosed content. For example, line 492 of the source code for the St. Luke's "About" page is `<div class="mainContent">`, and line 634 is `<div class="row footerNav">` (<http://www.st.lukes.org/about/>). These two division blocks identify the main section of the page and the navigation section of the footer, respectively. While a human reader quickly reaches this

conclusion, the indexing spider or browser needs additional logic to determine this. They require much less code for a standardized tag. HTML5 introduced several tags that offer clues to the machine and human readers in a standardized fashion. In the first example, `<main>` could replace the entire tag, and in the second, `<footer><nav>` would clearly indicate that the major navigation for the page is included within the footer. This eliminates ambiguity and the search indexing engine can prioritize the content that is unique to the page.

To determine how far each church has progressed in implementing the HTML5 semantic tags, I downloaded the HTML files for every page in the primary navigation menu on the churches' websites, plus one additional level down if the link did not lead away from the site (See Appendix A for the command used). I used a Python program to generate a command file that renamed the files in a regular pattern (Appendix B). Another Python program processed each file and generated a list of tags and the number of times each tag was used. This information was output in Comma-Separated Values (CSV) format (Appendix C). The resulting data were processed through Microsoft Excel to summarize by website and tag. The results are shown in Table 2. In the data, `<details>`, `<dialog>`, `<main>` and `<summary>` had no occurrences and were omitted from the table for clarity.

Table 2: HTML5 tag usage by site

Site	Number of Pages	<article>	<aside>	<footer>	<header>	<section>
Acacia Grove	17	15	48	16	0	0
Forest Hills	17	22	115	35	33	13
Grace Family	36	12	0	34	44	488
GracePointe	24	0	0	23	23	0
Lakeside Fellowship	42	58	0	41	41	34
Northland	72	2	0	74	1	12
St. Luke's	70	485	63	68	69	139
Van Dyke	28	0	0	0	1	1

The data show an inconsistent implementation of HTML5 across the sites. In general, the sites have adopted the <footer> and <header> tags for identifying these standard webpage components. Three sites are outliers: Acacia Grove and Northland mark the footer but not the header, and Van Dyke omits the header tag on all but one page and does not include the footer tag anywhere on the site. St. Luke's offers the most consistent implementation of all the sites, large or small. Forest Hills shows that the use of the modern standards is within reach of the smallest of churches.

The low adoption by Northland and Van Dyke in comparison to the others may be related to the tools used. I read the HTML for each site's homepage looking for clues about the content management system (CMS) or other tools used to build the website. All sites except these two appear to be using the WordPress CMS. WordPress uses a directory structure on the server that



places many of the files sent to the browser in directories underneath a directory named *wp-content*. The presence of this directory in file links is a strong indicator that the site uses WordPress. Only Northland and Van Dyke lacked this marker. They may require additional work by their IT staffs to add HTML5 semantics to their designs, while the other sites can leverage work done by WordPress and WordPress theme developers without devoting internal resources to the work.

## Multimedia

One characteristic of web hypertext is the use of images and video along with words on the page. Redish notes that there are five reasons for using images in modern website design. Of those five, two are particularly applicable to the church website. Adding a picture is good if the picture will make the words memorable or if the picture will advance the conversation between the site and the site's visitor (276-80).

Pictures make the words memorable by showing the people in the church involved in activities. Visitors can see glimpses into the church life and try to imagine themselves as one in the congregation. From the sites studied, three stood out in their use of pictures.

At one extreme is Acacia Grove. Their website is completely devoid of pictures of any type. Graphics are used in the header, in the footer's links, and as identification logos for their CARE+CONNECT and SERVE@AGC ministries. Without pictures, the potential visitor must decide based on word alone. Even the videos of sermons that are on the site do not show the church or the congregation. The video includes only the graphic aids that the pastor used during the sermon and the audio presentation.

GracePointe effectively uses pictures on its homepage to advance the conversation. The page is divided into different sections, and the pictures provide the background to each section. One section invites the reader to “get connected” and has a special link to their ministry for children as well as one for their groups in general. The background picture is of a young child with a smile. His eyes are looking toward the text in the section, directly leading the reader to it and reinforcing that the section specifically calls out the ministry to younger ages (Figure 3).

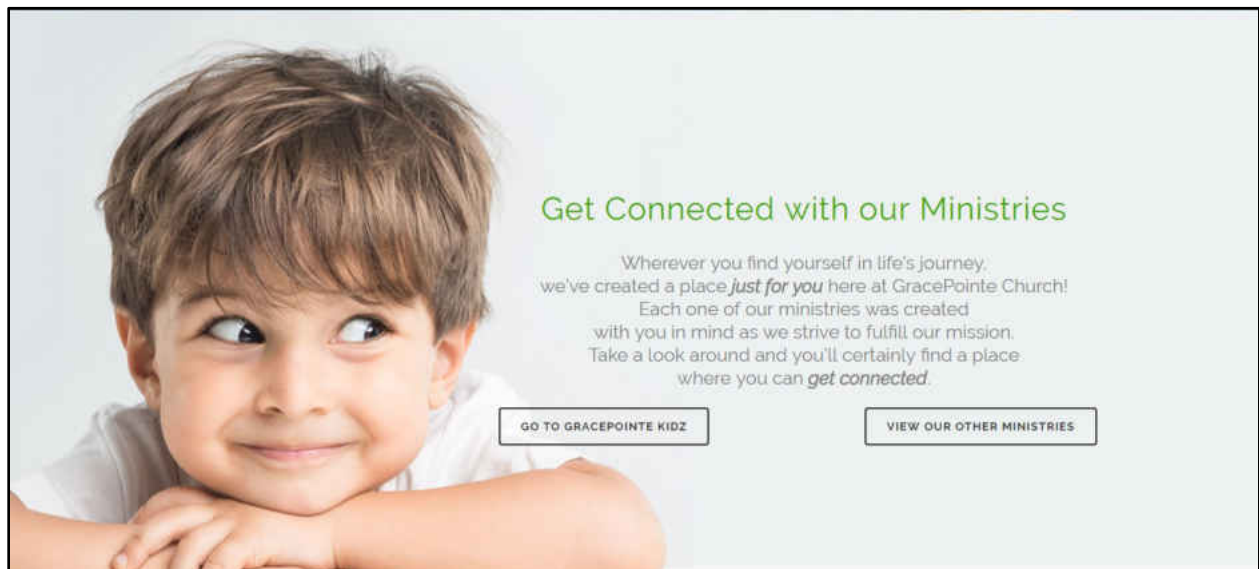


Figure 3: Ministries Section of the GracePointe Homepage  
Source: <http://gpnaz.us>

The GracePointe photo gallery page («Media→Photo Galleries») shows church members in different activities. The people in the picture are from diverse cultures and span a wide range of ages. This readily moves the conversation forward since nearly every visitor would be able to find a person from their demographic represented. Unfortunately, this is the only place on GracePointe’s website that actual congregational pictures are used. Using the Google “search by image” function, I determined that most of the pictures used on the other pages are stock

photography. For example, the child in Figure 3 could also be found at the top of an article on Inc. magazine's website with a credit to Getty Images (Matyszczyk).

At the opposite extreme is Grace Family Church (Figure 4). Although my search was not comprehensive, I only encountered one picture that could be identified as a stock photo on their website. A diverse cross-section of people was represented in the pictures. Grace Family used pictures of buildings without people to identify the campuses. These were the only pictures on their website that did not include people. One homepage image was clearly designed with the intent of showing that people are at the center of the church. It is built of a mosaic of small pictures of people in a variety of situations.



Figure 4: Grace Family Church mosaic  
Source: <http://gfconline.com/>

Van Dyke and Northland use pictures to advance the conversation in a slightly different way. Both of these churches have sites where the primary links on some pages are large blocks with image backgrounds and text overlay. Van Dyke's only use is on their homepage, but Northland incorporates this style on three sections of the site: Connect, About, and Ministries. Each of these pages is a "pathway" page, essentially a table of contents that gives the visitor a quick overview and then moves them forward to their desired content (Redish 97). Northland

makes an effective use of graphics to support the target in most cases and uses a combination of photos of people or a supporting still life that is indicative of the subject in Figure 5.

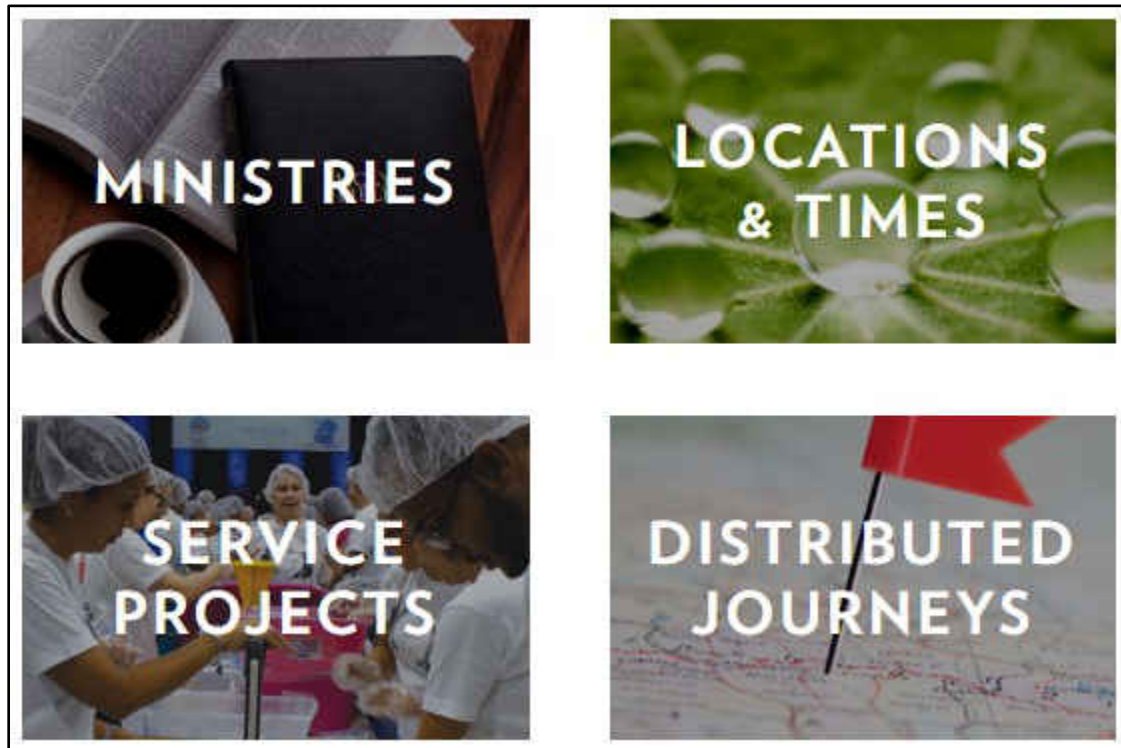


Figure 5: Four pathway options from the Northland “Connect” page  
Source: <http://www.northlandchurch.net/connect/>

Video appeared on several websites. The ubiquitous use on the sites that offered links to video content was for visitors to view sermons or services. Even for smaller churches, offering video links is easy by exploiting Web 2.0 features for embedding content from other sites, then uploading the video to YouTube, Vimeo, or another hosting site. This significantly reduces the need for the church to have the technical knowledge and infrastructure to process video into the formats required for the web.

Two of the sites, Northland and Van Dyke, incorporated video directly into their homepages using the HTML5 `<video>` tag. The videos used by both churches provided short

clips of worship and other church activities. This was a very effective way of quickly showing a visitor what to expect at the church. Since one may now shoot and edit video on a late-model smart phone, this is a technique that a church of any size could easily implement on their website. The video used by Van Dyke Church at the time of my research only required 1.4 megabytes of disk space, or less than a high-quality JPG image.

Northland, Van Dyke, and Grace Family provide live video streams for their services. Northland and Van Dyke have designed their live stream system to give the visitor/viewer a way to interact via text chat with other viewers and a representative of the church. This is an effective way for the church to bring the viewer into the community by using the familiar paradigm of a chat room.

## Navigation

In *Don't Make Me Think*, Steve Krug devotes an entire chapter to designing website navigation for usability. He notes that page layout is important for consistency, but navigation is especially important to “counteract the Web’s inherent ‘lost in space’” feeling (77). Pathway pages provide one form of navigation, but attention to menus can greatly affect the usability, and thus the reader’s impression, of the website. If visitors cannot find the information they seek quickly and easily or gets frustrated in what the classic Adventure computer game called “a maze of twisty passages, all alike,” they will abandon the site and go elsewhere. Krug identifies some key concepts for navigation design (75-80):

- The menu text and the page name should match.

- The current section within the menus should be distinguished from the other menu items by color, typeface, or another readily identifiable visual clue.
- The page should use breadcrumbs to orient the user.

On each website, I looked for these markers to determine how well the churches had designed in navigation. See Table 3.

Table 3: Navigation overview

Site	Menu and page name match	Menu choice is visually distinct	Breadcrumbs show location
Acacia Grove	Yes	Secondary only	No
Forest Hills	Less than half	No	Yes, below level 1
Grace Family	Yes	No	No
GracePointe	Yes	Level 1 only	No
Lakeside Fellowship	Yes	Yes, all levels	No
Northland	Usually, but not consistently	No	Inconsistent and do not always reflect the visitor's path to the page
St. Luke's	Yes	No	Sidebar menu header indicates level 1 for that page, not the path used by the visitor to reach the page
Van Dyke	Yes	No	For second-level choice only, placed at the bottom of the page

No church implemented all three of Krug's recommendations. Half of the sites did not use breadcrumbs at all. Two of them did not place them at the top of the page or use the greater-than sign (“>”) to separate the levels, so the implementation could be considered non-standard (Krug 80). Only Northland and Forest Hills followed the recommendations for placement and presentation, but their implementations were incomplete. Forest Hills place breadcrumbs only on pages at level two and below in their hierarchy. Northland's breadcrumbs, when present, did not

reflect the path used by the visitor to get to the page. For example, following «About→Senior Pastor» led to a page titled “Dr. Joel C. Hunter” and the breadcrumbs read “Home • About • Staff” (<http://www.northlandchurch.net/joelhunter/>). Rather than being helpful, Northland’s breadcrumbs are confusing and do not help orient the visitor.

Northland’s and Van Dyke’s designs offer many paths to the same page via blocks on different pages. Implementation would be difficult in these cases. The other sites, with simpler designs, should be able to provide a visual clue in the menu without significant effort; most WordPress themes will add a class attribute to the `<li>` tag indicating the active menu. CSS code can style the attribute accordingly. Lakeside Fellowship’s website uses this technique to change the color on the menu selections to their accent design color.

St. Luke’s design with color-coded menu sections offers the most potential for a well-designed navigation system. Highlighting the section and color-coding the page would instantly give the visitor significant visual clues about the visitor’s location in the website. St. Luke’s site does not do either of these things. I was disoriented on my first visit to their site because I expected the pages to match the menu sections, even if the only part of the page was the sidebar menu that is consistently on each page. In Figure 6: St. Luke’s “Connect” section, the sidebar menu is blue, but using the orange that is associated with *Connect* would give a tighter integration with the church’s marketing and identification design.

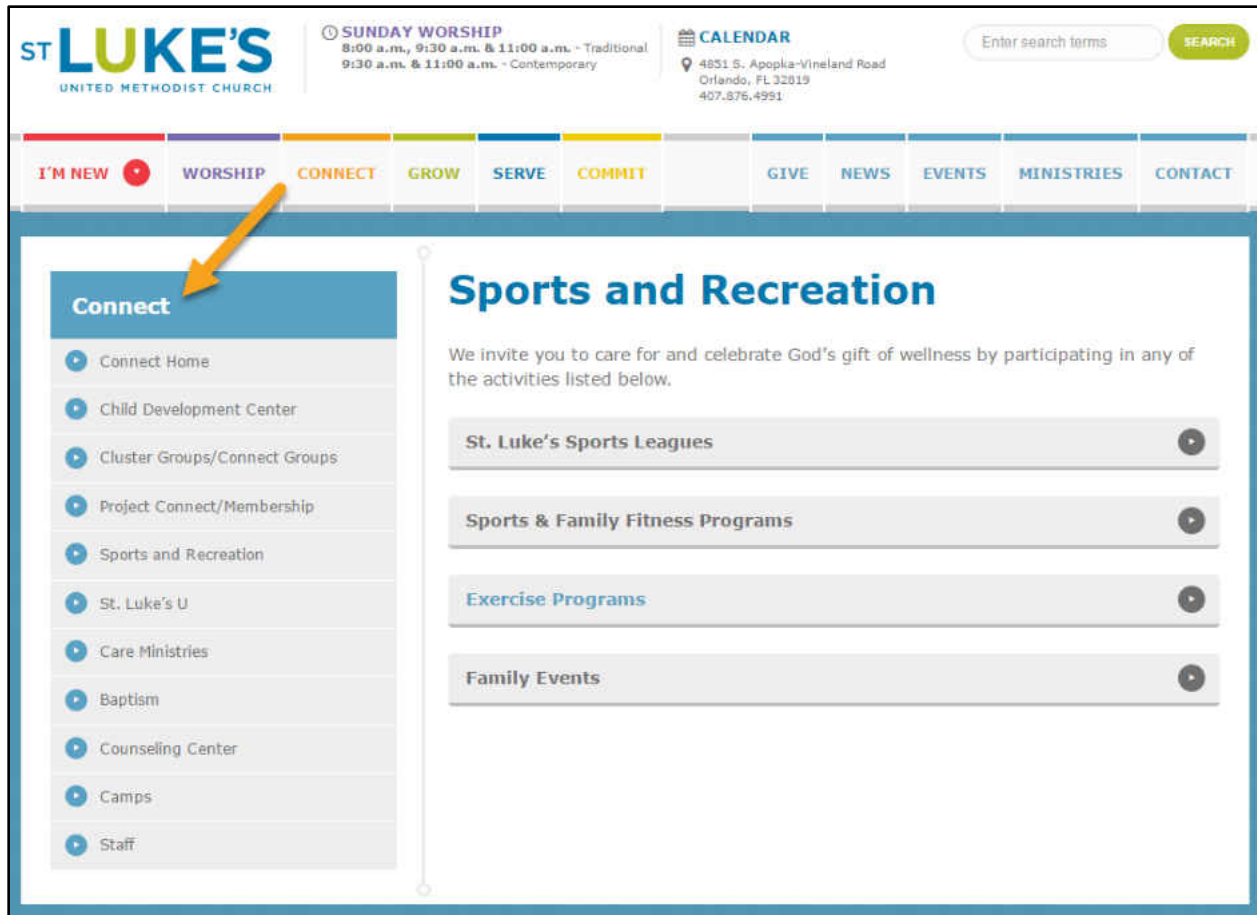


Figure 6: St. Luke's "Connect" section  
 Source: <http://www.st.lukes.org/sports>, 9 Oct. 2016

St. Luke's use of a sidebar menu also introduced confusion during navigation of the website. The sidebar menu used is based on the page's default position within the menu hierarchy (multiple menu selections are linked to some pages). The header of the sidebar menu and the entries in the menu changed and "stranded" the visitor attempting to move through the pages of a section sequentially. Selecting the *Staff* option at the bottom of the *Connect* sidebar menu in Figure 6 resulted in the sidebar changing to read "Contact" and the menu options are replaced with those from the *Contact* section of the website (Figure 7).



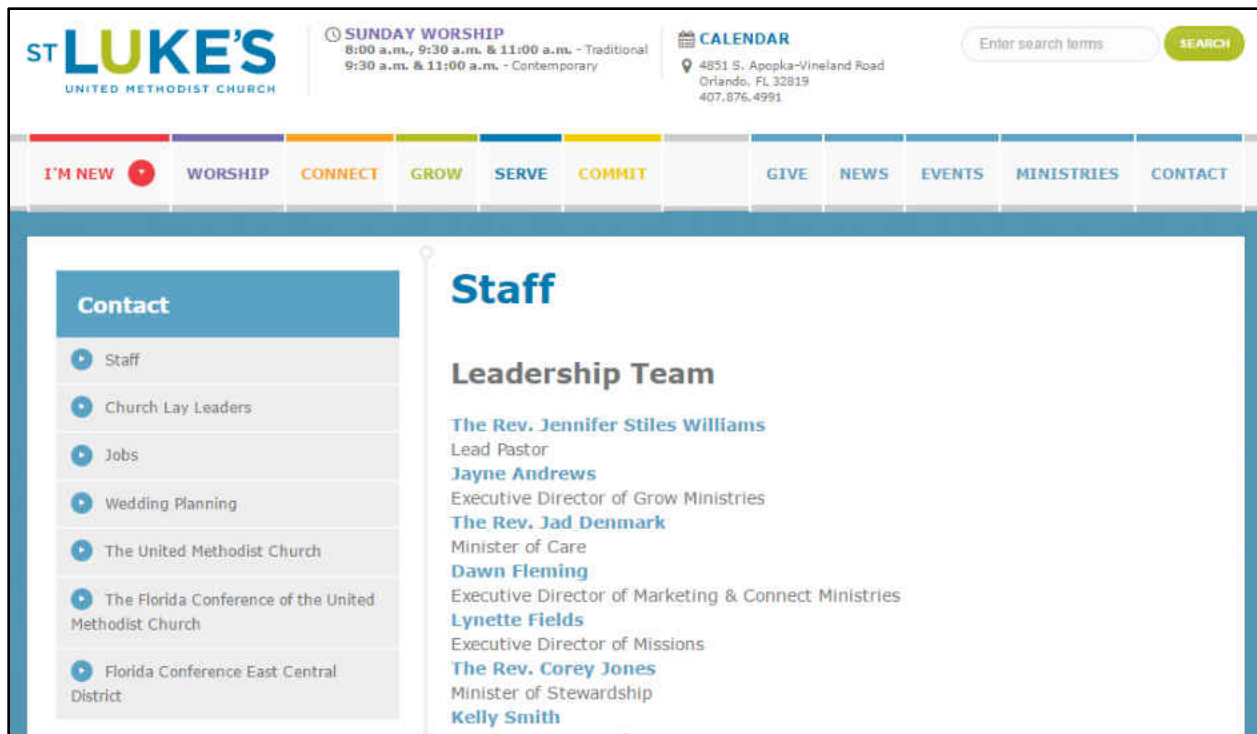


Figure 7: St. Luke's Staff page  
 Source: <http://www.st.lukes.org/staff>, 9 Oct. 2016

Northland's website shows an interesting design decision. Like St. Luke's, Northland's menu has been divided visually. Some items are in Roman capital letters and others are italic mixed case. This in itself is not strikingly different than St. Luke's approach. Unlike St. Luke's, all the menu options but one do not have any secondary choices. Except for the menu item that leads to their online giving system, the options lead to pathway pages. Some permit the visitor to filter Northland's many options to a subset tailored to the visitor. The design is modern and efficient.

Even though the "Ministries" choice on the main menu leads directly to a pathway page listing ministry categories, these categories are also presented as a secondary menu when the visitor hovers the mouse over that choice on the main menu. Northland has 57 categories of

ministries listed in this secondary menu and on the pathway page. The result is a menu that requires a minimum window width of 1300 pixels to view in its entirety on a desktop; narrower windows truncate the menu. Even at this width, the server software has truncated some entries and marked the truncation with ellipses. Menu entries for the middle school and high school programs at the Oviedo campus are listed as “Northland Oviedo Students . . .” which introduces ambiguity. The usability of this sub-menu is questionable and its unique inclusion unexplainable through observation (Figure 8).

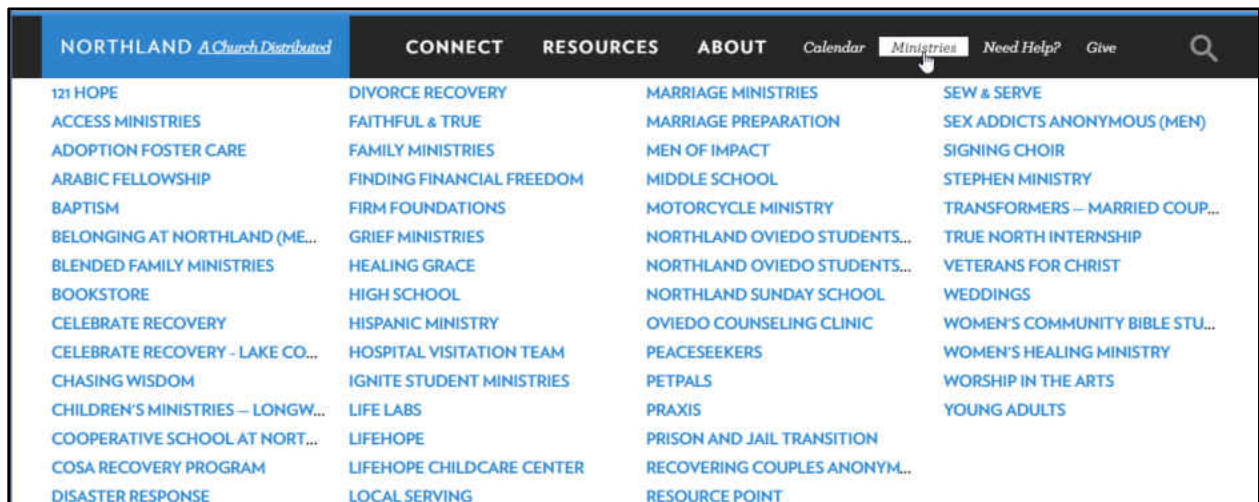


Figure 8: Northland “Ministries” sub-menu  
 Source: <http://www.northlandchurch.net>, 9 Oct. 2016

## Content

Every page on a website should assume that the visitor is coming to the page from somewhere other than the homepage or the menu hierarchy of the site. Mark Baker offers this advice in *Every Page Is Page One* (EPPO). He also lists some key features for “EPPO” topics: they should provide context, address one topic, stay on one level, and link richly (73-74; 78). The

final design aspect I will consider is how these churches have incorporated EPPO design into their websites.

I chose a page that would be common on church websites, oriented toward one of the primary audiences discussed in Chapter 3, and would provide information about a specific program or activity. This would provide a relatively consistent frame of reference, a specific subject that goes beyond a general statement of identity or contact information, and focus on a task if there were a task-oriented page on the site. Topics included arranging a visit, becoming a member, or joining a group. GracePointe’s website does not have a page of this type. On the GracePointe site, the staff page and their statement of beliefs page were the only ones with more than one paragraph of text. I excluded this site because they offered insufficient content to include in this section.

“Getting Started” on Lakeside Fellowship’s website (Figure 9) is an excellent example of EPPO writing for a church («New Here?→Getting Started»). The page is divided into three sections. Introductory paragraphs in two of the sections are followed by short lists of specific actions the seeker can take along the path to membership and full participation in the life of the congregation. The bullet points start with an action verb. Most include a link to another page on the website, and the links follow Redish’s advice to avoid using “click here” or “more” as the link text (262-64). Redish also advises not to embed links in the running text for most content, but I posit that on these lists the brevity that embedded links provide is better than adding a second sentence to each bullet (265-66).

## Getting to Know Each Other

You may be new to acknowledging there is a God and much newer to the idea of having a relationship with God. You may also be new to this community of people called Church. Like any new relationship, we need a little time to get to know one another.

- Learn more about us through our Website
- Join us for [Worship](#) at 10:30am on Sunday.
- Connect to a [Small Group](#).
- Join us on one of our [Outreach](#) Projects.

## Ready to Grow

You've been experiencing life with us as we learn to follow Jesus and now you feel God calling you to the next step. Maybe this step is the first time you have begun to trust in Jesus Christ. Maybe you're returning to a deeper faith in Christ. Maybe you would like to be baptized and become a member of God's family here at Lakeside. What do you do?

- Contact Pastor Cameron 407- 330-6560
- Join us for [The Disciple's Path Class](#) held 3-4 times per year.
- Celebrate your faith and baptism or reaffirmation of baptism during worship.

## Keep Growing

Continual growth in faith is best done in a [Small Group](#). [Get Connected](#).

Figure 9: Lakeside Fellowship “Getting Started” article

Source: <http://lakesidefellowship.org/get-started/>, 10 Oct. 2016

The other small UMC church in the study is not quite as focused and organized on their “Get Involved” page (Forest Hills «Get Involved»; Figure 10). There are 16 different activities, groups, and ministries listed and 11 start with a verb: *receives*, *acquires*, and *plans*, for example. The page displays the titles of each in underlined red text. This makes it appear that each is a link since the red text (RGB: 128, 0, 0) is similar to the red used for links on the site (RGB: 128, 23, 23) and underlining is a common visual clue for a link on many sites. The visitor is teased into believing these are links when only one-quarter of them are and must “mouse around to discover what is and is not a link” (Redish 268). This and the centered text detracts from what is otherwise a mostly well-written page.

Get Involved

---

**Right here in one centralized location... all the things you can do...**

**AT, WITH, and AROUND Forest Hills UMC**

If you have interest in serving, WE NEED YOU!

Volunteer for outreach events, assist before and after worship, join one of our praise and worship teams and a lot more!

Pick an area of interest and email [webdev@foresthillsumc.com](mailto:webdev@foresthillsumc.com) with your contact information and we **WILL** get the right person in touch with you. Have an idea for something you don't see listed? We want to hear about that too.

**Prayer Ministry** – Receives prayer requests from a variety of sources and responds with private prayer (anyone can do this). Plans and lead corporate prayer events.

**Music Ministry** – Chancel Choir, Sonlight Praise Band, Hand Bell Choir

**Shepherds Way Food Pantry** – Acquires & distributes food to those in need.

Worshiped, Trained, Preserved, & Sponsored... and media during worship service

Figure 10: Forest Hills “Get Involved” page  
 Source: <http://foresthillsumc.com/get-involved/>, 10 Oct. 2016

St. Luke’s uses an “accordion” element on their “Plan Your Visit” page so the visitor can see both an overview of the steps upon first entering the page. Clicking on one of the steps opens the detail for that step. Links are provided in the detail as required. The steps and the detail lack simplicity and parallelism, which makes it somewhat difficult to follow at times. Step number two, “Let Us Know You’re Coming,” has two paragraphs that start “If you . . .” and the second leads to a list that is neither indented nor bulleted, making it difficult to determine without close reading the organization of the section (Figure 11). A streamlined rewrite with nested lists is more direct and engaging with the visitor (Figure 12).

**1. Choose a Worship Service and Time**

**2. Let Us Know You're Coming**

If you think you might need some assistance finding your way around campus please feel free to email the [Connect office](#) by 3:0 p.m. on Friday so that we can arrange for a volunteer to meet you at our designated Connection Points.

If you have children or students, feel free to [register for childcare and Sunday school \(for children six week through grade 4\)](#) in advance or email us with any questions. For older students we offer:

**5th and 6th Grade MERGE:** Games and activities make scripture come alive. Meet in the Attic of Building C from 9:30 a.m. to 10:30 a.m. [Email us](#) for more information.

**7th and 8th Grade ECHO:** Grow deeper in the Bible with your fellow students. Meet in Building C Room 205-207 from 9:30 a.m. to 10:30 a.m. [Email us](#) for more information.

**9th through 12th Grade:** Build a stronger faith connection. Meet in Building C Room 204-206 from 9:30 a.m. to 10:30 a.m. [Email us](#) for more information.

[View a complete list of classes for adults and sign up in advance or just drop in.](#)

**3. Parking**

Figure 11: "Plan Your Visit" page at St. Luke's  
Source: <http://www.st.lukes.org/visit/>



**2. Let Us Know You're Coming**

- **Want a guide during your visit?**  
A volunteer can meet you to show you around. [Mail the Connect office](#) by 3:00 p.m. Friday.
- **Have young children?**  
We have childcare and Sunday School for age six weeks through grade 4. [Register them so we can properly welcome them.](#) If you have any questions, just [email us](#).
- **Dragging the teens with you?**  
We've got programs just for them:
  - **MERGE** 5th and 6th graders join in games and activities that make the scripture come alive. MERGE meets in the Attic of Building C from 9:30 a.m. to 10:30 a.m.
  - **ECHO** 7th and 8th graders grow deeper in the Bible with their friends. ECHO meets in Room 205-207 in Building C from 9:30 a.m. to 10:30 a.m.
  - **HIGH SCHOOL** students build a strong faith connection. This group meets in Room 204-206 in Building C from 9:30 a.m. to 10:30 a.m.

[View a complete list of classes for adults and sign up in advance or just drop in.](#)

Figure 12: Rewritten “Plan Your Visit”

*LifeHope* is an assistance program supported by Northland. The information page for this ministry covers the scope of the project, eligibility, application guidelines, and has a question-and-answer section. The page is long—1700 words—and is all text except for an embedded video. One of the more memorable guidelines for web content comes from Janice Redish, who says that longer pages should be organized to provide a summary first, then a key message, and finally the details: “bite, snack, meal” (134-36). This page does not reflect this organization and mixes detail (“What if I am not eligible for financial assistance?”) with overview (“The . . . ministry is a limited financial fund provided through tithes and offerings of the Northland Church congregation”) (<http://calendar.northlandchurch.net/group/lifehope>). An investigation of the HTML source reveals that the heading texts are paragraphs styled with the `<strong>` tag, not true HTML header tags. The lack of thoughtful organization and formatting for the web

suggests that the content was remediating from multiple print sources without considering how writing for the web is different than writing for print.

## Summary

In an increasingly mobile and search-driven world, it is encouraging to see that all eight churches have considered mobile and that 75% of them have embraced HTML5 semantic tags at some level. The two megachurches that have not added HTML5 significantly appear to rely on in-house expertise for the complete design and implementation of the website, while the other six benefit from the large WordPress development community. It may be that the concept of using HTML5 semantic tags is still not widespread and well understood outside of the professional web programming world.

Multimedia is ubiquitous. Only one church did not have audio or video embedded in the website. The most common use of embedded multimedia was to present sermons. Northland has incorporated video into other pages such as the LifeHope page that includes video of the staff explaining the LifeHope program. Three of the four large churches offer live video streams in addition to recorded video and have found ways to make the live streams an interactive, multi-way conversation between visitors and the church. The resources required today for live broadcast may exceed the capabilities of the smaller churches, which would explain why this is only seen in the three largest churches in the study (the fourth large church, St. Luke's, has approximately 500 fewer members than its UMC counterpart in Tampa, Van Dyke).

Navigation needs improvement across the board. Matching the menu selection and page name can be improved through attention to detail and editing, and the two sites that had



significant issues, Forest Hills and Northland, are totally opposite on the three axes of this study. The two orienting features recommended by Krug, breadcrumbs and visually distinct menu choices, were not well implemented by any of the sites, if they were implemented at all. On the smaller sites this may not greatly impact usability, but on the larger sites—St. Luke’s and Northland in particular—maintaining a sense of location can keep the visitor from having to hunt for information. An opportunity exists for better documentation of why this is important and how to use top-down or bottom-up classification systems to organize church websites.

My most counter-intuitive discovery is that the large churches had bigger issues with creating EPPO-style content than smaller churches. The best example came from the small UMC church in Orlando; the worst from the large non-denominational in Orlando. Since the content for both pages did not involve location, the common geography is unlikely a factor, especially since the Tampa churches had similar issues.

## CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

### Summary and Findings

I have worked in churches since 1996 in a variety of capacities ranging from music minister to technology manager to volunteer in outreach ministry programs. Over this time, churches have progressed from asking why a website is necessary to insisting that the website is a key ministry that needs a standing committee to support and manage. The eight churches represented here all have taken care to build their virtual web presences that provide the website visitor with a view into the personality of the congregation and insight into the relative importance of different aspects of church life.

My research focused on determining the efficiency and impact of these websites on the one hand, and looking at similarities and differences across geography, denominational affiliation, and size. Chapter One reviewed the growth of the Internet and its impact on how we find information, including the information about businesses and services in our communities. I considered how technical communications and hypertext theory are relevant in studying how a community of faith presents itself over the Internet. I raised three questions for investigation that are reviewed below.

Chapter Two reviewed relevant literature across multiple disciplines that impact this study. This research looks at information and communications technology from the perspective of the humanities, putting it within the realm of the digital humanities. The texts being examined, the websites, are hypertexts by definition, and the research establishes aspects of the differences between printed text and hypertext. Because a website establishes a conversation between

publisher and visitor, a discourse is created, and I discussed a new theory of discourse analysis in the digital realm put forth by James Paul Gee. This led to the way that the field of technical communications guides communicators to organize information and publish it in hypertext. Finally, I reviewed the long and deep relationship between religion and the Internet, how religion has been at the leading edge of communications advances through the ages, and other published research that looks at the church website not from the standpoint of religion, but rather from the standpoint of the communicator working in hypertext. I noted that previous research identifies two primary audiences for a church website: someone looking for a church and the current church member.

Chapter Three and Chapter Four reported the results of my research on the eight church websites. I looked at each page available through the menus of the websites from the standpoint of both a visitor and a technical communicator. I considered the invented ethos established by the websites, the audience for the website, and the design aspects of the website.

In Chapter One, I identified several questions to guide my research. The questions and my conclusions are summarized below.

*Do the pages engage the reader in a two-way discourse?*

Across the board, the churches try to bring the website visitor into a conversation. Pages generally reflected *we/you* sentence construction. All churches included contact information as a hyperlink and a call to action on one or more pages. The text slipped into third person on some sites and on certain pages. Interestingly, this was observed primarily on the large church websites, but rarely on the sites for the small churches. This was a result that is not easily explained. My hypothesis is that the size of the sites has made it difficult for the marketing team

to comprehensively edit the text, or the marketing team (if any) had insufficient personnel or funds to perform a comprehensive edit. I did not observe a denominational difference, nor was there a difference because of geography.

The discourse afforded each of the audiences differed from site to site. Most churches made an explicit attempt to reach out to those looking for a church by including a section of their main menu with visitor-oriented content. Northland is the notable outlier, offering little guidance to help the seeker navigate their way into this large, active church. Reframing this in the language of virtual discourse used by Gee, Northland's website generally presents one avatar to the site visitor. Other churches have a specific avatar of the church "greeter" in the form of the "I'm New Here" or similar menu section.

All churches in this study clearly target the current members with their content. The publication of schedules, while helpful to the seeker audience, is of greatest value to the existing member since seekers generally start their face-to-face visits to the church at Sunday services. Ministry listings and contacts are similarly focused, as are opportunities for contact beyond livestreaming and "Contact Us" forms. The avatar is, for the most part on these pages, a single entity reflecting the church and attempting to present the church's level of formality in the language used (note the "Dr. Hunter" of Northland and the "Pastor Jenn" of St. Luke's).

None of the churches included in my research directly addressed the third audience, another church's staff researching other churches for programming and website ideas.

Larger churches included the opportunity for two-way, real-time conversations between visitors and the church during live broadcasts. This was the only observed opportunity for the

visitor to be visibly engaged in the dialogue and possibly interact with other visitors or church members.

*Since large churches may have more resources for their online presence than small churches, are there meaningful differences in the way they address the three identified audiences?*

Seven of the eight churches had a dedicated menu item focused on the new visitor and often highlighted for emphasis. Northland offered information similar to that which the other websites published, but the information was not collected for easy reference. Van Dyke and St. Luke's, both large, offered "plan your visit" pages that were interactive and invited the visitor to contact the church prior to visiting. The interactive "plan your visit" page represented the most significant difference in the way the large and small churches addressed the potential visitor to the church.

The large churches generally engaged with the existing member in a different way than the smaller churches. The larger churches assumed the existing member would visit the website for scheduling and opportunities to serve both inside and outside the church. The sites tied the physical and the virtual more closely. St. Luke's website's color-coded menu items corresponded to color codes used by the church in other materials such as the PDF representation of the weekly bulletin found on the website and pictures on the site that showed the color coding in use in the physical plant. Grace Family's pages assumed the reader was familiar with procedures and processes at the church such as the way groups were created and hosted or how members could move into leadership positions through training. Grace Family and Northland included pages focused specifically to each of their campuses.

*Does the church's affiliation with a denomination change the discourse?*

The short answer to this question is “no.” On three of the four UMC churches, the affiliation with the denomination was not a significant factor in the discourse. The affiliation was reflected in the church logo, links to the denomination, and expected pages such as membership information or church governance. The texts on the sites did not assume knowledge of Methodism. The fourth site was especially removed from the denomination in an apparent desire to look as much as possible like a non-denominational church.

*What can technical communicators learn about guiding non-specialists in website and content creation?*

There are two areas where these websites consistently reflected design and implementation issues. Navigation of the content on larger sites was confusing and missing the signposts that many website visitors require to avoid disorientation on the site. Site content frequently was written as if in a print environment or as if it had been remediated from a print environment. They need to “Let go of the words,” as Redish would say.

Technical communicators can assist by producing texts that are accessible to the layperson that show the basics of content organization, writing for brevity, and incorporating multimedia effectively. The website designers and content managers would understand how to build navigation that assists the visitor to locate the desired information, write web-oriented text or remediate content from print instead of presenting it unchanged, and fully leverage the multimedia aspects of a hypertext environment.

*How can technical communicators construct hypertext that is effective when the rhetorical position is built more on pathos than logos?*

The most effective pages were the ones that included authentic pictures of people in the church engaged in activities. Without using words, the pictures allowed the visitor to see the church at work and the members as individuals. One example is from Grace Family's website (Figure 13). The Soup Kitchen mission project is not described at all in the text. The accompanying text is strictly procedural with instructions and links to forms. The picture carries the message by showing people filling containers with food. Without words, the argument is made that this is a vital ministry, it invokes empathy for the hungry and the homeless, and that a diverse church is working together.



## Soup Kitchen

The Soup Kitchen meets every Tuesday and Wednesday starting on Van Dyke Campus at 5:00 PM. The Soup Kitchen serves 6:00 – 7:00 PM.

» [View the 2016 Soup Kitchen Holiday Schedule](#)

- Consent and Release forms are required for all participants.
- Students 15 and up may serve without an adult.
- Students under 15 must be accompanied by an adult.
- Volunteer leaders are not responsible for other volunteers' children.

### Forms

- [Soup Kitchen Consent and Release – Adults](#)
- [Soup Kitchen Consent and Release – Minors](#)

Questions can be submitted to [soupkitchen@gfconline.com](mailto:soupkitchen@gfconline.com).

Figure 13. Grace Family Church Soup Kitchen information  
Source: <http://gfconline.com/serve/missions/#soup-kitchen>, 6 Dec. 2016.

## Directions for Future Research

This research identified more common elements than differences in the websites studied. One direction for future research is to expand the number of churches included and reduce the focus to one or two questions. The broader sample size may uncover differences that were not evident here. It seems safe to say that geography is not as significant of a factor as hypothesized at the beginning, although I will concede that all of these churches are suburban and differences may appear with the inclusion of urban or inner-city churches.

Expanding beyond the Protestant and evangelical non-denominational churches may prove of interest. Future research might include Catholic and non-Christian religious groups, or it could look at ethnic churches such as the African American churches, Asian congregations, or Spanish-speaking congregations. The style of communications and use of hypertext in African American megachurches could be compared against churches of similar background to Grace Family Church and Northland from my study. Tucker identifies several that have been in existence for decades and even were megachurches in the mid-20th century (81).

Roman Catholics have theological and organizational differences with Protestant denominations. Catholic parishes tend to be larger and more culturally diverse because of the expansive scope of the church and its origin outside North America. How do these factors affect the organization of the website? Catholic parishes are part of a stronger hierarchical organization than most Protestant churches (Episcopalian churches may be an exception); is this reflected in their website? Does the website's content make assumptions about the visitor's familiarity with Catholicism, whether or not the visitor is Catholic, or is there a "greeter" avatar that reaches out to the visitor seeking to discover more about the Catholic faith and about the parish in particular?



How do ethnic churches outside the white Protestant and African American Protestant faith groups use their websites? Is there a similar focus on two primary audiences as seen here, or do the communities of faith target their community in ways that differ from the churches studied here? How does a non-English-speaking community or a bilingual community organize their website? For a bilingual or a multilingual community with a website in more than one language, do the message and audience shift based on the language? Is the message culturally compatible?

Additional study of the ultrastructure is another direction for future work. Although forensic investigation of the page source indicated that most of the churches used WordPress as their CMS, the final composed HTML showed significant differences in implementation of HTML5 or use of HTML hierarchy tagging (i.e., headers or sections). Except for page-specific content like the headers formatted with `<p><style>` tags instead of a header tag, the organization of the page hierarchy is dependent upon the WordPress theme used on the website. Detailed analysis of the theme would require access to the theme's PHP source code; it would be necessary to contact the church and gain its cooperation to see the source. This would open examination of the practices of church website construction:

- What is the theme's origin: in-house or hired consultant, a "stock" theme (purchased from a software firm or clearinghouse specializing in WordPress themes), or a "stock" theme modified by the church?
- How often is the theme updated to correct bugs or other issues?
- How often is the theme updated to implement new functionality?
- How is this process handled? Does the church have a regular review process for site updates?

Comparing WordPress and non-WordPress sites may be an interesting avenue of research. Why was a non-WordPress CMS such as Joomla or Drupal chosen, or why did the church forego a CMS? If there is no CMS (for example, Northland appears to be in this category), what tools and libraries are in use, and why were these chosen? What was the perceived benefit of pursuing this route? How does this affect ongoing development and maintenance of the site?

What seems certain is that religions will continue to use every available medium to spread their message, offering opportunities for professional communicators to guide them.

**APPENDIX A**  
**GETFILES SHELL COMMAND FILE**

```
01:#!/bin/bash
```

```
02:wget -r -l1 -H -D$1 -Rjpg,png,js,txt --follow-tags=a  
--default-page=EndsInSlash http://$2
```

**APPENDIX B**  
**NAMER.PY**

```

01:#!/usr/bin/python2
02:import sys
03:import os
04:from bs4 import BeautifulSoup
05:import pipes
06:
07:for root,dirs,files in os.walk("."):
08:    for f in files:
09:        try:
10:            bs = BeautifulSoup(open(root + "/" + f), "lxml")
11:        except:
12:            continue
13:        try:
14:            top = bs.find("html")
15:            if not top:
16:                continue
17:        except:
18:            continue
19:
20:        newName = f
21:        try:
22:            newName = newName[:newName.index("?")]
23:        except:
24:            pass
25:        theRoot = root.strip("./")
26:        theFullPath = (theRoot + "/" + newName).split("/")
27:        theSite = theFullPath[0]
28:        theServer = theFullPath[1]
29:        del theFullPath[1]
30:        del theFullPath[0]
31:        src = pipes.quote(root + "/" + f)
32:        dst = pipes.quote("../final/" + theSite + "____" +
theServer + "____" + "____".join(theFullPath))
33:        print "cp " + src + " " + dst

```

**APPENDIX C**  
**PROCESSTAGS.PY**

```

01:#!/usr/bin/python2
02:import os
03:import sys
04:import re
05:import glob
06:from bs4 import BeautifulSoup
07:import pipes
08:
09:def doProcess(theFile):
10:    soup = BeautifulSoup(open(theFile), "lxml")
11:
12:    taglist = {}
13:
14:    for tag in soup.find_all(True):
15:        if taglist.has_key(tag.name):
16:            taglist[tag.name] += 1
17:        else:
18:            taglist[tag.name] = 1
19:
20:    theKeys = taglist.keys()
21:    theKeys.sort()
22:
23:    (theSite,theServer,theRest) = theFile.split("_____")
24:    theFilename = "/".join(theRest.split("_____"))
25:    theFilename = theFilename.replace("EndsInSlash","")
26:    if len(theFilename) == 0:
27:        theFilename = "/"
28:    elif theFilename[len(theFilename)-1] == "/":
29:        theFilename = theFilename[:-1]
30:    theSite = theSite.strip("./")
31:
32:    for k in theKeys:
33:        print theSite + "," + theServer + "," +
    pipes.quote(theFilename) + "," + k + "," + str(taglist[k])
34:    return
35:
36:#
37:# Main Program
38:#
39:if len(sys.argv) < 2:
40:    print "Usage: " + sys.argv[0] + " " + "node-prefix"

```



```
41:         exit()
42: theNode = sys.argv[1]
43: for f in glob.glob(theNode + "__*"):
44:     doProcess(f)
```

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