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RELIGIOUS CONGREGATIONS

by

Jerlen Young Nelson

Abstract of a Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate Studies Office
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

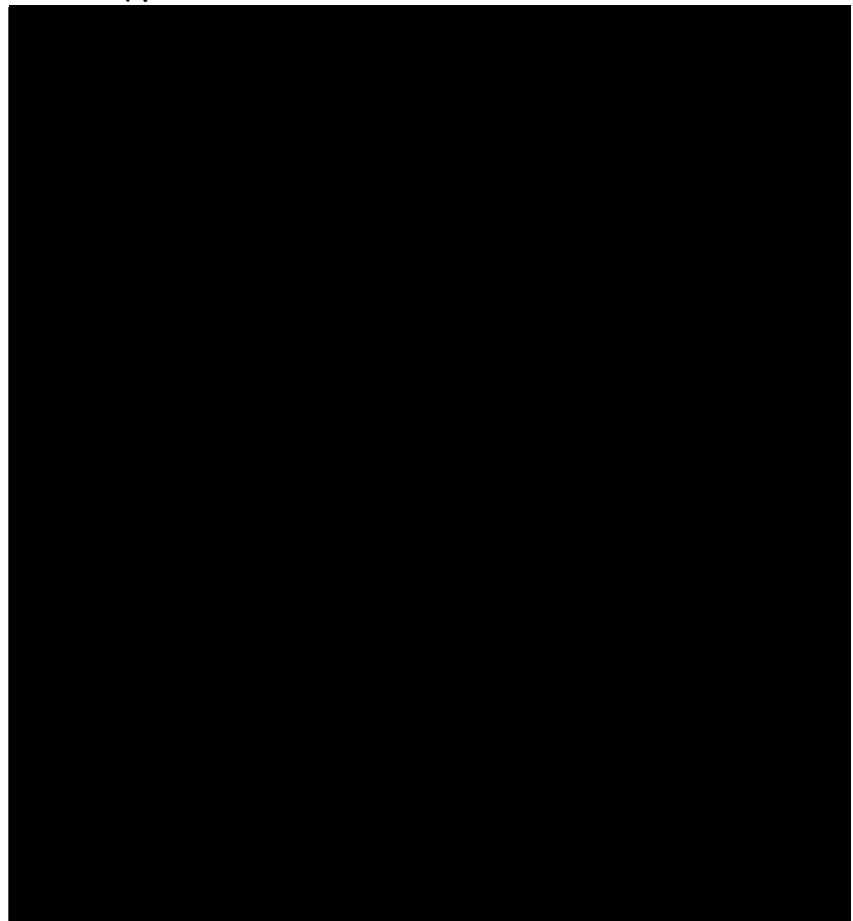December 2008

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ABSTRACT

THE CONTENT AND ROLE OF WEB SITES IN THE PUBLIC RELATIONS OF

RELIGIOUS CONGREGATIONS

by Jerlen Young Nelson

December 2008

This study presents an analysis of the content of Web sites belonging to local religious congregations. The study included a quantitative content analysis of the Web sites of 120 local congregations, which represented 12 different religious organizations. These religious organizations were all members of the Religious Communicators Council organization.

Results of the study emphasized the basic content and functions of the Web sites. Overall, this study found that 43.3% of the Web sites were used for informational purposes only. For example, a few of the most prevalent variables on the Web sites were the general contact information, staff information, e-mail addresses, worship service times, and special events times. In regards, to the functions of the Web sites, the most prevalent features were a part of the usability function of the site. For instance 100% of the sites had minimal unwanted ads and minimal downloading times.

The variables were coded into three main audiences: internal, external and media. The results indicated that the sites did not target any of the audiences specifically. The findings further suggest that the local congregations have not been using the Web sites to their maximum potential.

Furthermore, only one Web site of out 120 demonstrated the two-way

asymmetrical model of public relations in terms of the Web content and functions. And none of the sites practiced the two-way symmetrical model, considered to be the most effective model of public relations to use. On the other hand, 64 of the Web sites practiced multiple models of public relations, thereby confirming the theory of contingency. The contingency theory suggests that the public relations models are too rigid and that one model is not sufficient. Yet, the Web sites suggest more traditional or historical aspect of public relations on the hybrid continuum of public relations models.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the memories of John Akins, Penna Boyd, Linzeen Nelson and E. L. Young. You are forever in my thoughts.

To my husband, Dr. Picasso Nelson, thank you for your unwavering and untiring love and support. Without your encouragement, I would never have pursued and completed this degree. I love you!

To my favorite daughter, Linzee Elise. Mama loves you dearly. All of this is for you. Always remember the sacrifices. And never forget the importance of education. To my stepson, P.J. always know that you are loved. I am proud and honored to have you in my family.

To my parents, Dr. Jerry and Mrs. Helen Young. *"Praise God from whom all blessings flow."* God truly blessed me with wonderful parents. Thank you for all of your sacrifices, your constant presence, and your unconditional love. And most importantly, thank you for keeping Linzee throughout this process. To my favorite sister, Kelli. What can I say? You have grown to become one of my best friends. I pray God's richest blessings on your future. I hope to call you Dr. Kelli one day. To my in-laws, Dr. Arthur and Mrs. Shellie Stubbs, thank you for your encouragement and love. To my grandmother, Mrs. Louise Akins, I love you. Thanks for always being supportive and for your words of wisdom.

To my friends, family and Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority sisters, thank you for your love and support throughout the last four years. To my church families, New Hope Baptist and Mt. Olive Baptist, thank you for your prayers, support and encouraging words.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The unprecedented linking of twentieth-century technology with Christ's commandment, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15), has created a dynamic new phenomenon that I call "the electric church."
— Armstrong, 1979

The United States of America was founded with the promise of religious freedom. The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution states that, "Congress shall make no law regarding the establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof" (U.S. Constitution, 2007). Countless religious organizations exist today. Studies have shown that it is nearly impossible to accurately assess the number of religious organizations nor the variety of denominations because many do not release information to the public.

As a result of the astronomical numbers of religious organizations and the importance of religion in the lives of many Americans, religion utilizes the principals of public relations. Through the printing of the Bible, religious news media, religious tracts, television programs and various other examples, the religious world has sought to communicate with the secular world. Today's religious organizations are now partaking in the latest technological innovation: the Internet. According to Sowards (1997), "a good Web site has a purpose for the designer who wrote the page, the editor who maintains it, and the Web surfer who finds it... A Web site without a potential audience is pointless; a purposeless Web site will have no audience" (pp.155-156). This drives the heart of this dissertation. Religious Web sites need to have content that seeks to fulfill a

purpose and capture a targeted audience.

Importance of the Study

Religion and its use of media have been prevalent throughout the history of mass media. With the emergence of new technologies everyday, religious organizations are having and needing to understand how to use and incorporate these new forms of technology. Hoover (2002) wrote it best:

> The realms of both "religion" and "the media" are themselves transforming and being transformed. Religion today is much more of a public, commodified, therapeutic, and personalized set of practices than it has been in the past. At the same time, the media (movies, radio, television, print and electronic media, and more) are collectively coming to constitute a realm where important projects of "the self" take place—projects that include spiritual, transcendent, and deeply meaningful "work." This means that, rather than being autonomous actors involved in institutionalized projects in relations to each other, religion and media are increasingly converging. They are meeting on a common turf: the everyday world of lived experience. (p. 2)

To date, however, there is limited research examining the impact that the World Wide Web, as a new form of technology, has had on the religious world. This study incorporates the analysis of the Internet component to the realm of religious public relations with the increasing use of technologies in public relations. The results from this study will provide additional information about the role of Web sites in the overall scheme of religious public relations on a local

congregation level. The results will aid the local congregations in determining the role of the Web sites and also provide useful information about the content possible for their Web sites.

Considering the lack of studies on the content and role of Web sites in public relations of religious congregations, the present study is an attempt to inform religious public relations practitioners and other congregation leaders about the importance of the information and Web tools being placed on their Web sites. Through the use of the public relations models, the overall function of the Web sites in religious public relations is examined.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the content and functions of Web sites of religious congregations in the church's public relations or communications plan. The need for this study is evident in the increased popularity of Web sites and pages created by religious organizations. Numerous research studies have examined non-profit organizations and their use of Web sites for public relations, but relatively few studies have looked into the role of the Web sites for religious organizations (Smith, 2007; Sturgill, 2004).

The use of the Internet is increasingly becoming a part of everyday culture. Previous research about the use of Web sites in public relations is plentiful (Hill & White, 2000; Kang & Norton, 2006; Middleberg, 2001; Naude, Froneman & Atwood, 2004; Will & Callison, 2006). Some studies have been conducted which analyze the content of Web sites of corporations (Callison, 2003; Connolly & Broadway, 2007; Esrock & Leichty, 1998; Hachigian &

Hallahan, 2003). Other studies also indicate increasing incorporation of Web sites in nonprofit organizations (Kang & Norton, 2006; Kang & Norton, 2004; Naude, Froneman & Atwood, 2004; Will & Callison, 2006). Most organizations have incorporated Web sites as part of their public relations and marketing efforts (Kent & Taylor, 2003).

Regardless of the increasing use of the Internet for nonprofit public relations, few studies have been conducted which look at the use of Web sites by religious organizations. Traditionally, religious organizations have used a variety of public relations tools and media channels for their religious purpose and recently have implemented new media including the Internet and other technologies (Cameron, Wilcox, Reber & Shin, 2007). This study will focus on the Web and analyze the Web sites created by religious congregations to determine the main content and function of the Web sites. A content analysis was used to investigate how religious congregations use their Web sites for public relations to further their mission.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The History of Religion and Public Relations

In 1993, John P. Ferré chronicled the history of Protestant press relations in the United States from 1900 to 1930. In 2000, Ferré chronicled the years from 1930 to1970. In the earlier years, the Protestant press had dwindled from being a strong tool of communication in general to a more specific in-house press tool used by the churches. The Protestant press was an instrument "that provided ministers with a means of reaching a general readership" (Ferrè, 1993, p. 514). Protestant publicists felt that the secular newspaper was the most viable means of spreading their messages to the masses:

> Convinced that newspaper coverage would swell their churches and their coffers, ministers began to utilize publicity techniques. So many churches sent publicity to newspapers that one observer noted, 'The competition among the clergy [for newspaper space] is thus keen, for the relative importance of a preacher is indicated by the length of what is printed about him.' Large churches hired stenographers to provide the press with verbatim transcripts of sermons. Many preachers began to preach their sermons with an eye toward the following day's headlines and leads, discussing current events, perhaps a popular book or play, and tying their topics into a holiday or other special event whenever possible (Ferrè, 1995, p. 520).

In 1929, twenty-one Protestant publicists established the Religious Publicity Council. During this period of time, the newspaper had lost its luster as the major vehicle of communication for the religious sect. The Protestant press were no longer distributed nationally, but were now in-house publications. The public was becoming more secular and inspired by the secular press. Feeling the pressure to develop a better way to reach the public, denominations opened public relations offices that were led by experienced public relations practitioners (Ferrè ,2000). Ferrè (2000) surmised that "sophisticated PR would be key to maintaining any sort of presence on the public agenda. Indeed, public relations and church presence were often used synonymously, as in John Fortson's definition of public relations as 'the task of keeping the Church at the center of modern life' and in Stewart Harral's claim that the very survival of churches depended upon how well they competed with other institutions to gain and maintain public favor" (pp. 266-267).

Kirban (as cited in Ferrè, 2000, p. 269), author of the *Church Promotional Handbook*, wrote: "I cannot understand how any school can devote so much time to acquainting young men and women about the Bible and so little, if any, time in showing them how to move the product... Schools are spending all their time on the 'manufacture' of Bible scholars and none in showing the scholar how to move his product (God's Word) off the showroom floor and into the hearts of men and women for whom Christ died." Ferrè (2000) describes the need for more "salesmanship in church work" (p. 269). Churches were having to seek out their publics, instead of the publics seeking out the church. The need to advertise was

great. Ferrè (2000) wrote: "The apparent preference for face-to-face personal communication, particularly on church property, would make Protestantism less and less relevant in a world in which other social agencies sought public attention aggressively" (p. 270). The church was having to reach their publics where they were: at home, at work, and in the community.

The history of the church, public relations and technology are parallel. In order to reach the public, the church used public relations strategies and tactics along with the emerging technologies to reach the majority of their publics. This trend continues even with the advent of the Internet.

The Use of the Web and the Internet in Public Relations

With the rapid growth in use of the Internet by profit and not-for-profit organizations, very few are immune. The use of the World Wide Web (WWW) is growing at a staggering rate. In 1995, the United State's Census Bureau reported that 31,686,000 people were using the WWW. By 2005, 140,507,000 users were accessing the WWW (Census Bureau, 2000). For an ever-increasing number of businesses, a Web site is the initial contact or the only contact that they have with new and existing publics. The contribution of Internet access for all publics is immeasurable in its importance for public relations professionals (Sallot, Porter & Acosta-Alzuru, 2004). For example in 2002, Tian and Emery (as cited in Maynard, M. & Tian, Y., 2004) suggested that the Internet is "the most exciting marketing innovation in history" to reach its consumer public. No longer are practitioners solely concerned with how to attract consumers to their stores, but to their organization's Web site. They are now able to reach their consumers with

specific products or services that they are looking for without direct contact with them or without their visiting the store.

Kamat's (2002) writing sums up the usefulness of the Web site in public relations in a dynamic organizational environment with the key function of Web sites as disseminating information to various publics:

If the organization is considered to be an integral part of the community, it bears the responsibility of generating and sustaining dialogue with its publics for the greater good of all involved. Having a Web site that enables such actions would help in this process. In the current competitive economy, knowledge and speed of response provide an edge over competition for organization. A Web site that speedily circulates information through the organizational system and its environment is a definite advantage. (p. 2)

Kresser (1996) noted four roles of organizations that use the WWW. The roles are (1) to establish online presence, (2) to deliver content, (3) to build community and (4) to sell products and offer services. According to Kresser (1996), all four characteristics must be included in order to have a viable Web site. The public relations practitioner must be aware of these characteristics in order to effectively communicate with the new technology-oriented public.

Equally important, Kent and Taylor (1998) further indicated building dialogic relationships with publics through the use of the World Wide Web. Their study suggested five guidelines that public relations practitioners should implement in order to intertwine dialogic public relations with electronic media.

Those guidelines are: (1) the dialogic loop; (2) the usefulness of information; (3) the intuitiveness/ease of the interface; (4) the generation of return visits; and (5) the rule of conservation of visitors. Kent and Taylor (1998) suggested these guidelines as "how to develop Web pages, structure content, organize information, appeal to publics, and most importantly, build relationships with publics" (p. 326).

The principle of the dialogic loop states that a feedback loop is important (Kent & Taylor, 1998). Kelleher (2007) suggested that people should be able to ask questions or even to voice their concerns through an online tool. Web sites should offer their publics the opportunity to e-mail key personnel in the organization. It is then the responsibility of the personnel to respond to the e-mail in a timely and effective manner. Kent and Taylor (1998) also emphasized that these key personnel should be trained in responding properly in order to keep the level of professionalism in place. The content of the response is what aids in building relationships. People must have a positive feeling about the e-mail, whether it is delivering positive or negative information.

The second principle involves the usefulness of information. Kent and Taylor (1998) found that "sites should make an effort to include information of general value to all publics—even if a site contains primarily industry, or user, specific information" (p.327). They surmise that content is more important than graphics and other flashy tools/instruments. Kelleher (2007) suggested that "useful information …means that you are providing publics something of substance that will allow them to engage you as informed partners" (p. 50). The

information on the site should be relevant to the publics and align with the overall goals of the site.

The third principle involves the generation of return visits:

Sites should contain features that make them attractive for repeat visits such as updated information, changing issues, special forums, new commentaries, on-line question and answer sessions, and on-line 'experts' to answer questions for interested visitors... Simply updating 'information,' or trying to include 'interesting' content represents one-way model of public relations... Other tools to encourage repeat visits include formats for frequently asked questions, easily downloadable or mailed information, technical or specialized information that can be requested by regular mail or electronic mail, and referral services or links to local agencies or information providers. (Kent & Taylor, 1998, p. 329)

The fourth principle deals with the ease of interface. Publics who access the Web should be able to navigate through the site without being confused. The site should be outlined in a logical and systematic way. There should not be too many graphics and the text should be organized. Kent and Taylor (1998) suggest that "sites should be interesting, informative, and contain information of value to publics" (p. 330).

The fifth principle is the rule of the conservation of visitors. The advertising on sites should be kept to a minimum. Kent & Taylor (1998) suggested that "Web designers should place sponsored advertising, or institutional advertising at the

bottom of pages or behind other clearly marked links to avoid the 'attractive-nuisance' factor, and the tendency of users to be led astray" (p. 331).

Web designers have often overlooked the role of building dialogic relationships with targeted publics. The inclusion of chat rooms, discussion forums, e-mail and other electronic forms that allow for two-way asymmetrical and symmetrical communication have been underutilized. Public relations practitioners also have not utilized these tools effectively. Many sites are placed on the WWW in order to have a presence, but not to serve a function. One of the major goals of public relations is to be open with the targeted publics. This openness can only be accomplished through dialogue. Kent and Taylor (1998) were right on the importance of building a dialogic relationship, especially on the WWW.

Later, Kent, Taylor & White (2003) explored the relationship between Web site design and organizational responsiveness to stakeholders. They concluded that a majority of Web sites are not designed using the principals of the dialogic loop. Furthermore, organizational Web sites that they examined did not use two-way communication tools to communicate with their stakeholders effectively. Kent, Taylor & White (2003) suggested:

> Given the increasing role played by the Web in the conduct of commerce and as tools for organization-public relationship building organizations would be advised to increase their commitment to public dialogue if the full potential of the Web is to be realized. (p. 74)

In 2000, Smith, Bucklin & Associates, Inc. proclaimed, "The Internet is having a profound impact on the practice of public relations. Internet use is widespread by public relations practitioners and has become an essential communications channel to reach desired audiences" (p. 175). They particularly listed the usage of the Internet for nonprofit organizations: (1) research issues, (2) monitor news about the organization (3) research media targets (4) contact media representatives (5) distribute news releases and (6) provide an electronic clipping service. They suggested that the main function of Internet for nonprofit organizations was building relationships with the media.

Cameron, Wilcox, Reber and Shin (2007) categorized internet public relations as e-mail distribution, World Wide Web sites, RSS, and pod casting. They suggested "multifaceted forms of worldwide communication, primarily involving message exchange by e-mail, information delivery and persuasion through the Web, and extensive access to audiences for strategic research opportunities" (p. 271).

Overall, public relations scholars have formed two points of view regarding the use of WWW for public relations. One perspective is that the WWW is just another tool to aid in directly reaching and communicating to their publics without gate keeping of mass media (Shin & Cameron, 2003). The other viewpoint is that the WWW "has the potential to revolutionize and reform the interaction between organizations and their publics" (Esrock & Leichty, 2000, p. 328).

However, Ryan (1999, as cited in Porter, Sallot, Cameron & Shamp, 2001) surveyed Public Relations Society of America members in 1999 and found that

"99 percent of them use the World Wide Web, with 57 percent using it for surveillance of companies, 49 percent exploring databases at other sites, and 39 percent using the Internet to monitor government activities" (p. 173). He implied that the full effect of the WWW and its importance to the field of public relations have yet to be established.

This is more evident in the case of nonprofit organizations and their use of the World Wide Web (WWW). Although the Web has been a place for the commercial businesses and industries to reach their publics and offer goods and services on-line, its role in nonprofit sector, particularly religious context has been addressed less frequently. Opportunities exist for the studies of religious organizations and their use of the World Wide Web for public relations.

World Wide Web Reaching Targeted Publics

Being able to identify your targeted audiences is one of the most important elements in Web site design. Brinck, Gergle, and Wood (2002) proclaimed that defining your audience is the first step in the Web design process. "Anyone in the whole world can visit your site, but only those interested in the subject of your site are likely to. You identify those people—your targeted audience—and cater to them. The design may be brilliant, but if it doesn't suit the audience, it won't get the job done" (Vest, Crowson & Pochran, 2005, pp.6-7).

In determining the target audiences for religious congregations, the designers must understand who the audience is going to be before the content is determined. Brinck, Gergle and Wood (2002) suggested that a user profile needs to be created. This profile should take into consideration the market segment

(demographic information), accommodations for disabilities, and experience level of the potential users of the site. Additionally, objectives should be set. These objectives could be created by answering some basic questions: (1) Who are the users? (2) What do your users want and need? (3) What do the users need to do in order for this Web site to be a viable investment? (4) To what extent does the site need to satisfy both user and business [religious congregation] goals? (Brinck, Gergle & Wood, 2002, p. 64).

The use of the World Wide Web is more efficient than the use of the more traditional means of communication (Vattyam & Lubbers, 1999). The interactivity of the WWW is fostering a greater and more sustained relationship between the organization and its publics. For example, public relations practitioners are able to cater to the needs of their publics by including such features as "my store" or "my page" which allow their customers to customize the company's Web page to fit their individual needs, wants and desires. The practitioner is reaching various and global publics world wide, and customizing the Web to the needs of the individual. This was not a feature of any traditional means of communicating with publics: billboards, newsletters, television advertising, magazines, radio, films, etc.

From a managerial point of view, the cost of producing information on the Web is minimal. There is no cost for postage or paper or envelopes. The practitioner is able to get more done with the budgeted amount of money. O'Keefe (1997) indicated the WWW is a "low-cost tool for sending, receiving, and storing massive amounts of information." O'Keefe (1997) also pointed out that

the use of the WWW helps saves time, and information can be disseminated in real-time. The public can receive information instantaneously.

This does not mean that the WWW is necessarily the best vehicle for communication in every situation. Anderson and Reagan surveyed 104 practitioners in Washington State. Respondents were asked how often they used word processing, desktop publishing, electronic bulletin boards, electronic mail, internal databases and external databases, facsimile, teleconferencing, spreadsheet, and accounting software. Anderson and Reagan's study concluded that "technicians were found to use new technologies to enhance their job responsibilities, such as the production of news releases, graphics, and literature searches" (1992, as cited in Porter, Sallot, Cameron & Shamp, 2001). The practitioner still needs to conduct research on how best to reach the targeted publics. Not all of the publics are reachable on the WWW or by posting information on the Web site. Cameron, Wilcox, Reber and Shin (2007) addressed the digital divide or gap between "those who have an abundance of information technologies and the many more who would have none" (p. 269).

Acknowledging the problems in the Internet and the Web, it is yet a great tool to reach diverse publics. For example, public relations professionals can find out what their consumers are thinking about their company, brand, or a particular product or service through discussion boards, customer surveys, and other interactive tools/forms of encouraging feedback. Practitioners are opening up discussion rooms across the Web. This allows for instant feedback from consumers about a product or service. This feature can be seen as akin to

conducting a focus group without the time, expense and frustration of finding willing participants.

The ability to keep the stockholders informed is one of the key ways to keep them investing in the company. The WWW allows those publics who wish to have up-to-date information on the company's earnings and losses and they can keep track of new products and services being offered. Their being able to access the company's annual report and other news without having it mailed to them is important and keeps stakeholders in the loop of the company in a timely and efficient manner.

Another function of the WWW is to recruit employees (Vattyam & Lubbers, 1999, p. 12). Public relations practitioners and human resource departments are using the WWW to post job openings and applications. The companies that post jobs or career notices are seen to be more effective and efficient. The use of the WWW to promote the company and to bring in a wider variety of applicants makes the WWW a great resource.

Lim and Shin (2001) also examined *Fortune* 500 companies' Web pages. They examined the different relational contents such as media relations, consumer relations, investor relations and community relations, and the relational functions such as interactivity, playfulness, updateness and openness inform the perspective of building public relationships. The results show that the Web contents of manufacturing companies were different from those of non-manufacturing companies in terms of media relations and consumer relations. The manufacturing firms' Web pages also had more interactive, open, updated

and interesting functions than those of non-manufacturing firms.The WWW has also become a vital tool in communicating with the internal publics. Public relations practitioners are able to send electronic mail to the entire company, to a select group or department or to an individual. Public relations practitioners are using the electronic mail service to communicate effectively and efficiently about recent developments and to keep the internal publics abreast of information before it reaches the public. With the aid of this tool, the internal publics are more aware of the company's operations without having to sit through hours of staff meetings.

Public relations practitioners are also able to personalize the electronic mail and announce birthdays, anniversaries, retirements and moves. This helps to build a stronger community amongst the internal publics. Information relevant to the internal publics is not necessarily on the Web site. Esrock and Leichty (2000) conducted a content analysis of 100 *Fortune 500* companies in 1997. The researchers concluded that there were six main publics that company Web sites targeted: shareholders/investors, prospective employees, customers/customer service, media, dealers and retailers, and current employees. The study found that only 3% of the information on a company's Web site is relevant to current employees. This was the lowest of all percentages (Esrock & Leicthy, 2000).

In terms of reaching the media, Web sites are encouraged to include certain key information. Kent and Taylor (2003) wrote an article entitled "Maximizing media relations: A Web site checklist." They devised a Web site

checklist. This list had five basic categories: (1) attracting media, (2) easy to use, (3) media relevance, (4) value added design and (5) interactivity. The attracting media section had five variables: (a) links to the organization's home page prominent on every page, (b) important information relevant to your organization on home page, (c) fast loading, (d) link to media section loads immediately and (e) posted last update time and day.

The "easy to use" section had five variables: (a) no advanced applications [plug-ins] needed to view site, (b) limited use of graphics and special effects, (c) table of contents, (d) search engine box on the first page, (e) no links to other sites on home page. The "media relevance" section had 10 variables: (a) contact information for public, (b) bios of key organizational members, (c) backgrounders, fact sheets, position papers, news releases, (d) annual reports (e) history of organization, (f) high quality, downloadable graphics, (g) e-media kits, (h) searchable archive and (i) links to stories about your organization.

The "value added" section had five variables: (a) "bookmark now" and invitation to return, (b) calendar of events [updated regularly], (c) FAQ's or Q & A's, (d) downloadable/requestable information and (e) product, stock, donation, volunteer information. The last category, "interactivity," had five variables: (a) mailing addresses, telephone numbers, e-mail contacts, (b) visitor comments box, (c) news/chat forums, (d) how long before you respond? and (e) offer breaking information via e-mail listserv.

Kent and Taylor (2003) suggested that Web sites should contain information suitable for the media to use. At the bare minimum, the sites should

include contact information (telephone or fax numbers, e-mail addresses, etc.),
so that the media can easily and readily contact a person from the organization
to ask questions or to get information. "Journalists see the Internet as the place
to go for information" (Kent & Taylor, 2003, p. 18). Therefore, it is the
responsibility of the Web master/manager to include basic information that will
appeal to the media. Kelleher (2007) combined the lists of content that targets
the media from Callison (2003), Kent and Taylor (2003) and O'Keefe (1997). He
found that all three had the same basic information as is a stated above. The
main difference was that the Kent and Taylor (2003) list did not include detailed
information, such as multimedia archives, company philanthropic activity, and
financial information.

Understanding the potential audience is important. Brinck, Gergle, and
Wood (2002) suggested that

> Your Web site needs to work for *somebody* if it's going to work for
> *anybody*. The goal of a scenario is to make sure the site is not merely
> theoretically usable, but that it actually serves the needs of specific people
> in real life. You do this by describing how your Web site will be used by
> *specific* individuals in *specific* circumstances.... Typcially you need three
> to four scenarios as a good starting point to cover the standard users of a
> Web site, though many more may be needed if your site has a diverse
> audience with very different needs. (p. 39)

Public Relations Tools of Nonprofit Organizations

According to a report by the Independent Sector (2007), there were 1.9 million nonprofit organizations in the United States. Of these, 1.4 million were classified as 501(C)(3) organizations, which include hospitals, museums, private schools, religious congregations, orchestras, public television and radio stations, soup kitchens, and foundations. Nonprofit organizations' main function is not to generate a profit for stakeholders, but in most cases, seeks to serve the public interest, although the interests are often conflicting (Cameron, Wilcox, Reber, & Shin, 2007). The majority of these organizations use public relations strategies and tactics to communicate with their publics and advocate for their interest, goals or values. According to Smith, Bucklin and Associates (2000), "The core function of nonprofit groups – whether they serve businesses, professions, charities or causes – is to advocate, communicate and educate" (p. 249). Bronstein (2006) pointed out that the nonprofit organizations that focused on relationship management, dialogic communication, and resource sharing were the true advocates of their organizations.

Bronstein (2006) also found that due to small budgets, nonprofit organizations often formed partnerships with each other to share resources. For instance, Web sites tend to be co-sponsored by more than one organization with a common initiative. Sharing resources has given a new voice to the organizations in this electronically integrated world.

Smith, Bucklin, & Associates, Inc. (2000) suggested six activities that public relations supports in reference to nonprofit groups: (1) fund-raising, (2)

community awareness, (3) member recruitment and retention, (4) lobbying and issue advocacy, (5) crisis management and (6) special events (pp. 169-170). They contended, "the most effective nonprofits view public relations as two-way communications" (p. 170).

Cameron, Wilcox, Reber and Shin (2007) also addressed a variety of public relations strategies and tactics used by nonprofit organizations: (1) publicity, (2) creation of events, (3) use of services, (4) creation of educational materials, and (5) newsletters. Educational and health organizations also implement Web sites, campaigns and other strategies and tactics. Advocacy groups often use such hard tactics as (1) lobbying, (2) litigation, (3) mass demonstrations, (4) boycotts, (5) reconciliation and (6) fund-raising.

The Role of Public Relations with the Advent of Technologies

Several studies have explored the use of the WWW and its relationship to public relations (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Vattyam & Lubbers, 1999; Kamat, 2002). Kent and Taylor (1998) explored how public relations practitioners can use the WWW to build dialogic relationships. These scholars concluded that the WWW is a tool that public relations practitioners can use to communicate with thousands or millions of publics and be able to address their individual interests (p. 331). The WWW could be used to "enhance interest in their [practitioners] organization, contribute to dialogue, and increase public knowledge and awareness" (p. 326).

Hallahan (2006) particularly noted that dependability of information on Web sites is one of the key issues when dealing with crisis management. Various

publics will be seeking "up-to-date and accurate information about how the crisis might affect them and what actions they should take to avoid risks" (p. 125). He also indicated that in order to have ethical online communications, public relations practitioners "must concern themselves with reliability issues" (p 124).

Other studies addressed the role of public relations in relation to Web sites and whether the new technologies have allowed for public relations practitioners to become part of the dominate coalition or have they reverted to being just press agents. Sallot, Porter and Acosta-Alzuru (2004) conducted a qualitative study on the public relations practitioner's Web use and perceptions of their own roles and power. This study found that the WWW helped to "empower them by enhancing their roles and elevating their status" (p. 276).

In a study of online resources, Porter, Sallot, Cameron and Shamp (2001) found that 43 percent of the practitioners said that they practiced the publicity model of public relations, 30 percent the public information model, 9 percent the persuasion/compliance model and 25 percent the negotiation/adaptation model. Almost half of the respondents said that they were a part of management in their companies. Thirty-three percent said that their role was basically that of a communication technician. Sallot, Porter and Alzuru (2004) found that public relations scholars believed that the WWW was making it hard to distinguish the roles of public relations practitioners: "manager—technician roles are not mutually exclusive, that hybrid roles exist—managers, internals, externals and generalists or technicians, and practitioners in different hybrid roles use the Web differently" (p. 270).

Cutlip, Center & Broom (as cited in Dozier, 1984) suggested that no real roles are established for practitioners because the public relations field is still emerging. With still evolving parameters for the practice and practitioners, public relations scholars feel that the roles are continuously being redefined, especially with new technologies.

Internet Public Relations of Religious Organizations

From the beginning of Christianity, communication has played a key role in the church. Jesus told the disciples to "go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15, King James Version). Another commission from Jesus is recorded in Luke 4:18, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has appointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the downtrodden will be freed from their oppressors, and that the time of the Lord's favor has come" (New Living Translation Bible).

Historically, the religious world has always seemed to be a step behind the rest of the world when integrating new and emerging technologies. Today, however, despite late adoption, churches are initiating to use the Internet and other technologies alongside the business world and other nonprofit organizations. The church's commission to reach the world has been made easier because of the World Wide Web. Fuchs, Dean of Engineering at Cornell University and commonly referred to as "the minister of technology," believes that technology and religion have two common goals: "transcending human frailty and improving society" (Huang, 2005, p.1). Fuchs also believes that "religious Web

sites and chat rooms are exploding in popularity and are increasingly being used by churches for recruiting" (Huang, 2005, p.1).

The church is attempting to reach areas where mass audiences are located, both locally and globally. The realization that Jesus commanded the disciples to "go into all the world" seemingly was a daunting task. But with the creation of the World Wide Web, the church is taking advantage of its power to reach people globally. The church is able to reach mass audiences with minimal cost involved (Radcliffe, 2004; Naude, Froneman,& Atwood, 2004). Fuchs stated that the advances in communication technologies have increased the availability of religious information to larger audiences. Churches are beginning to use Web sites, and chat rooms and other functions on the Web sites in their efforts to recruit converts (Huang, 2005).

In More than talk: Communication studies and the Christian faith, Strom (2003) explored the different communication methods and their impact on religious institutions. He argued that Christians are starting to see the use of technology as a means to improve their lives and to aid in their evangelistic efforts. One of the great advantages of the Internet for churches is their ability to share the their message with the world. Although many organizations are skeptical about the Web, more and more are slowly starting to accept new technologies.

In 2007, George (as cited in Stahl, 2007) studied the development of twenty-first century religious communities. She found that just like other entities, religious organizations are beginning to become totally immersed in technology.

Her study looked at the Internet church or virtual church communities (George, 2007). "Wilson describes the Internet church as an opportunity to change the history of Christianity, comparing the 'information superhighway' to the Roman Roads built almost two millennia ago that facilitated the spread of Christianity" (Stahl, 2007, p. 72).

Churches have begun using streaming video to show portions of the worship services on the Internet. People are able to hear the sermon from wherever they are in the world. The Unified Communications (2008) Web site's (2008) definition of streaming video is:

> A sequence of 'moving images' that are sent in compressed from over the Internet and displayed by the viewer as they arrive. Streaming media is streaming video with sound. With streaming video or streaming media, a Web user does not have to wait to download a large file before seeing the video or hearing the sound.

The inclusion of this technological feature is enabling the churches to reach a larger audience of people.

However, there is evidence suggesting that religious Web sites, as a whole, are not utilizing the full potential of the Internet. Considering the possible applications of new technologies to the Web sites, such as video conferencing, chat rooms, and distance learning, to name a few, the Web sites of religious organizations seem to be mere electronic brochures.

In his examination of Southern Baptist churches and their Web sites, Sturgill (2004) conducted a study on the "scope and purpose of church Web

sites." There were four indices of purposive elements of church Web sites: organize, evangelize, interact, and building community. The largest of the areas identified on church Web sites was organization followed next by evangelization, interaction and community. This indicates that the majority of the church Web sites focused on showing the church as an organization.

In a study on Christian apostasy on the World Wide Web, Swanson (2005) found that "most sites were perceived to use an information dissemination [model] rather than evangelization or proselytization frame" (p. 1). In regards to visitors, he surmised that those Web sites primarily included "reading/study of scripture, evangelization/change of beliefs, engagement in a dialogue/discussion with organizers, and requests for further information (Swanson, 2005). These variables seem to be constant throughout religious Web sites.

Drawbacks of Internet Public Relations in Religious Contexts

More and more churches are using technologies to engage in dialogue with their congregations but many fail to reach all constituencies: "Despite their advantages, these networks 'tend to exclude those who lack the necessary computer resources or are unfamiliar with technology,' warns the report, entitled "Computer Networks for Churches: Church mouse gains new meaning," published in *Futurist* (1990, p.50). The author continues: Thus, some people may become cut off from religious dialogue and lose some of their input into church affairs. Moreover, if networks are given precedence over face-to-face and local contact, interactions over the network could weaken ties to local church groups and community (p. 50).

Cameron, Wilcox, Rebler and Shin (2007) addressed this digital divide issue,

along with the use of the Internet and the Web in public relations.

Moreover, there are some aspects against the implementation of

technologies including the Internet and the Web into religious communication.

Public relations ultimately requires some degree of human interactions (Shin &

Cameron, 2003), and religious communication has been historically and is still

based on face-to-face communication through non-media channels. For

example, most members of mainstream Christian religious communities still go to

church on Sundays for corporate worship, and may additionally attend Sunday

school classes, Wednesday Bible classes, and various other times to meet with

different ministries of the church.

In addition, most public relations professionals especially in religious

contexts lack detailed knowledge about the new technologies. This is another

main reason why technologies are not being used. The public relations

practitioners' inexperience with the innovations and how to use them to their full

potential is an increasing problem (Kang & Norton, 2004; Lindlof, 2002; Naude,

Froneman, & Atwood, 2004; Thumma, 2000).

There is relatively little research that directly looks at the Web content of

religious organizations. A recent study surveyed webmasters from religious

organizations and examined the processes that the organizations used to create

and maintain their Web sites. The findings indicated that there was no real

process for collecting new data on the church's Web site. In most instances, the

Web sites themselves were developed by a layperson in the congregation, not by

a professional Web developer, and several people and/or committees were involved in furnishing information (Thumma, 2000). Direct advice or involvement with public relations professionals appears to be relatively rare. A content analysis analyzed the kinds of information that religious organizations have on the Internet. This study found that the majority of the content on the Web sites studied have been purely informational but not substantial (Armfield & Holbert, 2003). It is clear from existing research why the church Web sites are not much utilized, reaching their maximum capacity. It is possible that the organizations have no clear focus or goal for the Web site, and, therefore, ultimately fail to maximize their potential for outreach.

Theoretical Frame

Public Relations Theories: Excellence Models in Public Relations vs. Contingency Theory of Strategic Conflict Management

Public relations is defined as the "management of communication between an organization and its publics" (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p.6). Public relations aids in creating and maintaining relationships between organizations and targeted audiences that are mutually beneficial.

Over the past several decades, public relations scholars have developed public relations theories to better explain public relations practice and establish the identity of the discipline. Grunig (1992) initially established four roles of public relations practice: press agentry/publicity model, public information, two-way asymmetric and two-way symmetric. The press agentry model and public

information roles are both one-way models in terms of information flow. Information flows from the organization to the publics.

According to Grunig (1992), the press agent/publicist and the public information practitioners are used to disseminate favorable information about a company or individual, usually in the form of a newsletter, mail-out or brochure. The press agentry model focuses on gaining publicity for the organization by any means necessary unlike the public information model that uses a journalist to disseminate information in a positive light about the organization. Furthermore, Kelleher (2007) wrote that, "what separates the pubic information model from the publicity and press agentry model is an emphasis on accuracy and utility" (p. 31).

The two-way asymmetrical model relies on research to aid in the development of messages for marketing purpose. Their goal is to persuade the targeted publics to buy into their company's plan for them. "Assymetrical communication is imbalanced; it leaves the organization as is and tries to change the public" (Grunig & Grunig, 1992, p. 289). Kelleher (2007) agreed:

> Two-way asymmetrical public relations is unbalanced. In this model, an organization gets feedback from its publics but uses this feedback as a basis for trying to persuade the publics to change. A key underpinning of asymmetrical communication strategies is that an organization wants the people it communicates with to change in some way, but the organization is unlikely to change much itself. (p. 45)

The two-way symmetrical model is perceived to be the best model for public relations. Kelleher (2007) proposed that, "two-way symmetrical public

relations then means (a) the organization takes the interest of publics into consideration, and (b) pubic relations practitioners seek some sort of balance between the interests of their organizations and the interests of publics" (p. 46-47). Grunig suggested that the two-way symmetrical model is the most effective, ethical and excellent public relations practice. Grunig & Grunig (1992) contend that the "two-way symmetrical model is balanced; it adjusts the relationship between the organization and publics" (p. 289). Grunig and Grunig (1992) explain the two-way symmetrical model:

> Two-way public relations provides a forum for dialogue, discussion, and discourse on issues for which people with different values, generally come to different conclusions. As long as the dialogue is structured according to ethical rules, the outcome should be ethical – although not usually one that fits the value system of any competing party perfectly. (p. 308)

However, there has been criticism on the four models of public relations, and particularly two-way symmetrical models. Banks (2000) contends that the ability to achieve two–way and balanced communication is rare. Heath (1994) states that "a symmetrical relationship exists between stakeseeker and stakeholder when stakes are perceived to be equal in worth and both parties are willing and able to exercise them" (p. 151). Cameron and his colleagues suggest that the contingent aspect of public relations practice cannot be easily defined in one of the four boxes.

The contingency theory of conflict management in public relations qualified the excellence models by suggesting that they are too simplistic and

idealistic to explain the reality of public relations (Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, & Mitrook, 1997). They argue that the world of public relations is so complicated that one model is not sufficient. "The practice of public relations is too complex, too fluid, and impinged by far too many variables for the academy to force it into four boxes" (Cancel, et al., 1997, 32). Cancel, Cameron, Sallot and Mitrook (2007) suggested a number of reasons why public relations practice cannot be placed in the four boxes: moral conviction, dominant coalition, legal constraints, etc.

With qualifications and criticism by other scholars (Cancel, Cameron, Sallot & Mitrook,2007), Grunig, Grunig and Dozier (2002) added one more model as a mixture of the two-way symmetrical and asymmetrical models, but he still stands in the win-win zone, which is comprising with two-way symmetrical public relations. The mixed motives model is still more symmetrical in nature than asymmetrical.

According to Choi and Cameron (2005), the reason the contingency theory is better than the excellence theory is that the contingency theory suggests there is not just one best approach to practicing public relations: "Contingency theorists argue that different strategies and practices should be considered for different environmental contexts in order to find an optimal fit" (p. 173). Smith (2007) agreed and suggested that "while the two-way symmetrical model may be effective in examining the technical capabilities of Web sites in two-way communication, what it does not take into account is that each organization is unique and has its own challenges" (p. 287).

Shin (2004) noted the assumptions of the contingency theory, along with the "conflict" notion inherent in public relations, the "continuum" concept of public relations, and "contingency factors" affecting the stance and strategies of an organization and its public on the continuum. The contingency theory allows for a continuum of accommodations and advocacy as a more accurate model for public relations.

There are 86 factors that aid in determining the location of an organization on the continuum (Cancel, Mitrook & Cameron, 1999): "The contingency theory of accommodation is a logical extension of work to date on models of public relations. The theory provides an alternative to normative theory and a structure for better understanding the dynamics of accommodation as well as the efficacy of accommodation in public relation practice" (p. 56).

However, the contingency theory has been criticized for it complexity and the lack of simplicity or parsimony with a number of factors. With some reflection of the criticism, the theory has been evolved with the quantification of contingent factors using different methods. Shin, Cameron and Cropp (2006) surveyed public relations professionals to see what contingent factors are influential to public relations practices and developed a matrix of contingent factors. Shin, Cheng, Jin and Cameron (2005) analyzed the news content to see the continuum concept of organization-public relationship and track how an organization and its public interact with each other with the development of an issue.

This study examines what theoretical frame will be useful to explain the Web public relations of religious organizations. Twelve religious organizations'

Web sites were examined to explore the content and function in relations to the public relations principles and theories previously outlined. The content of the Web sites determines which public relations models the sites have adopted, either knowingly or unknowingly. Religious congregations can use their Web sites to aid in their overall communication goal and to increase in the spreading of their message.

Please note the previous studies on religious Web sites were Protestant in nature. Therefore, the variables analyzed in this study may not be applicable to all organizations involved. For example, the evangelistic content is more suitable for Protestant organizations, but is applicable to all organizations in one way or another. Even though a religious organization may not be evangelistic in nature, it still employs a recruitment or a membership enlargement function. It is merely a difference in semantics. Each religious organization uses different word choices to describe the same concepts, but it is the same function. This study was not meant to be theologically correct, but to create a basis for future studies that will be able to dissect the mission, process and procedures of the various religious organizations as it relates to the content and role of the Web sites in public relations.

Research Questions

A great number of studies have been done on corporate use of the Internet; however, it is not easy to apply the studies of a for-profit organization to those of a non-profit organization. Religious organizations as nonprofit organizations have traditionally utilized non-media channels and undergone

changes with the advent of the Internet and the Web. Based on the previous studies (Kang & Norton, 2004; Lim & Shin, 2001; Sturgill, 2004), this study will analyze the content of Web sites and functions of churches to determine the status of technological advancement in religious contexts. This study starts with one principal question: What Web content and functions have been implemented into religious public relations? The following sets of research questions were set up according to information obtained in the review of literature.

RQ1: What content do church Web sites provide for their publics?

    RQ1a: Do church Web sites provide evangelistic information?

    RQ1b: Do church Web sites provide denominational information?

    RQ1c: Do church Web sites provide information about the church as an organization?

RQ2: What functions do church Web sites provide for their publics?

    RQ2a: What are the usability functions of church Web sites?

    RQ2b: What are the interactivity functions of church Web sites?

    RQ2c: What are the up-to-dateness functions of church Web sites?

    RQ2d: What are the playfulness functions of church Web sites?

RQ3: How do churches build dialogic relationships through their Web pages?

    RQ3a: Do church Web pages utilize the dialogic loop principles?

    RQ3b: Are church Web pages providing useful information?

    RQ3c: Are church Web pages including information for the generation of

return visits?

RQ3d: Do church Web sites have an ease of interface?

RQ3e: Are church Web sites using conservation of visitor information?

RQ4: How do church Web sites use relationship-building variables to target audiences?

RQ4a: Are church Web sites targeting internal, external and media publics?

RQ4b: What are the relationship-building features of church Web sites in regards to content variables and internal, external or media publics?

RQ4c: What are the relationship building features of church Web sites in regards to function variables and internal, external or media publics?

RQ 4d: What are the relationships between the content and function variables of church Web sites?

RQ5: What public relations model do the church Web sites represent?

RQ5a: Are church Web sites principally used for information only purposes or do they provide information that allows the user to engage in dialogue with leaders of the church or the staff?

RQ5b: Are church Web sites symmetrical or asymmetrical?

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This study analyzes the information that is included on local religious

congregations' Web sites in three basic categories: material designed to

convert/evangelize the user, material designed to present the church as an

organization, and material designed to show the church as allied with a larger

religious community or a denomination. The study will also explore the public

relations functions of religious congregations' Web sites: usability, interactivity,

up-to-dateness, playfulness and the generation of return visitors. This part of the

study will examine what public relations models the Web sites represent.

Sampling and Unit of Analysis

For the purpose of this study, the content of religious congregation Web

sites was analyzed. The unit of analysis consisted of the homepage and those

pages directly linked from the homepage, but no more than one click away. The

population consisted of the Web sites of religious congregations in the United

States that are members of the Religion Communicators Council. This

organization's goals and mission are defined on their homepage:

> The Religion Communicators Council (RCC) was founded in 1929 as an
>
> interfaith association of more than 600 religion communicators at work in
>
> print and electronic communication, marketing and public relations. The
>
> RCC provides opportunities for religion communicators to learn from each
>
> other. Together, RCC members promote excellence in the communication
>
> of religious faith and values in the public arena and encourage

understanding among religious and faith groups.(Religioncommunicators.org)

Table 1

List of Religious Organizations

Name of Religious Organization	Web site
Baha'i Faith	www.us.bahai.org
Evangelical Lutheran Church	www.elca.org
The Church of Christ, Scientist	www.churchofchristscientist.org
International Society for Krishna Consciousness	www.iskcon.com
United Church of Christ	www.ucc.org
National Baptist Convention, USA	www.nationalbaptist.com
Presbyterian Church, USA	www.pcusa.org
Seventh Day Adventist Church	www.adventist.org
Southern Baptist Convention	www.sbc.net
The Church of Scientology	www.scientology.org
The United Methodist Church	www.umc.org
US Catholic	www.catholicusa.com

The sample for this study was drawn randomly to select Web sites representing the 12 religious organizations from the RCC 2007 membership roster. The RandomBots program, a computer-based random number generator, was used to aid in randomly selecting ten states from each religious organization and then the ten local congregations. Neuendorf (2002) states, "For a content analysis to be generalizable to some population of messages, the sample for the

analysis should be randomly selected" (p. 83). Each religious organization has a listing of its local religious congregations listed on its national organization Web sites. A list of these congregations was created and the researcher randomly selected 120 Web sites to code. The 120 congregations represented 10 randomly selected congregations from each of the above religious organizations.

Coding and Intercoder Reliability

Berger (2000) suggests that including operational definitions of the various variables to be coded helps to have greater coder reliability. The researcher served as the primary coder along with an additional coder. The additional coder was given the coding book and briefed and trained to follow the coding system. The content was analyzed using various code categories with the operational definitions and instructions. Intercoder reliability was measured. To insure intercoder reliability, the coders analyzed 10 percent (12 Web sites) of the completed sample Web sites and their results were compared. A 90 percent or a greater level of intercoder reliability was achieved. The primary coder coded all 120 Web sites. The second coder coded every 20th Web site after the intercoder reliability was established in order to keep the intercoder reliability rate at the desired percentage.

Coding Categories

This study developed a coding scheme by adapting categories based on the previous studies (Jo & Jung, 2005; Kang & Norton, 2004; Lim & Shin, 2001; Sturgill, 2004; Taylor et al., 2001). The coding scheme is designed to examine information related to the religious content and public relations function of

religious congregations' Web sites. Ten general categories of Web sites were analyzed in this study: material designed to convert/evangelize the user, information to show that the local congregation is allied with a larger community/denomination, material designed to present the church as an organization, material designed to allow users to interact with the church or others, material designed to show the church as allied with a larger community, usability functions, usefulness of information to publics, interactivity functions, and dialogic loop properties (Kang & Norton, 2004; Sturgill, 2004).

The following is a breakdown of the major categories and the variables that encompass each one. The variables can belong to more than one category. The coding sheet is listed as Appendix A.

(A) Material designed to convert/evangelize the user: (1) links within the Web site to other religious information, (2) presentation of "plan of salvation," (3) text of pastor's sermons available online, (4) links to Bible study material not on the church's Web site and (5) Bible study materials available online.

(B) Information to show the local church allied with a larger community/denomination: (1) Link to denominational information, (2) other logos, (3) denominational information on church site, (4) listing of missions or service opportunities, (5) articles from news services or other publications, (6) calendar events for entities other than the church.

(C) Material designed to present the church as an organization. From the Web site, sixteen items will be coded. They are (1) worship service times, (2) church address/phone number, (3) photos of main church building, (4) weekly

schedule information, (5) listing of church staff, (6) special church event listing, (7) church mission statement, (8) photos of other buildings, (9) biography of pastor, (10) biography of other staff, (11) pastor's welcome to visitors, (12) church logo, (13) photos of church activities, (14) church newsletter and (15) church policies.

(D) Usability functions: (1) site map, (2) major links to rest of site, (3) search engine box, (4) low reliance on graphics, (5) short scrolls of text, (6), minimal navigation menus, (7) minimal pop-up windows, and (8) minimal unwanted or intrusive ads.

(E) Material designed to allow users to interact with the church or others. This category includes (1) "for more information" e-mail link, (2) the listing of the pastor's e-mail, (3) other staffs' e-mails, (4) webmaster's e-mail, (5) the ability to submit prayer requests, (6) a guest book, (7) the ability to read prayer requests, (8) a feedback form, (9) online sign-up for church activities, (10) printable sign-ups for church activities, and (11) online donations. Other features include (12) discussion forums, (13) chat rooms,(14) online polls, (15) online surveys, and (16) the ability to join the organization via online forms.

(F) Up-to-dateness: (1) Posting of last updated date and time.

(G) The generation of visitors: (1) pastor's welcome to visitors, (2) statement of philosophy/mission, (3) ability to join organization online, (4) church history, (5) description of church, (6) links to denominational information, (7) logo of denomination, (8) speeches from congregation leaders, (9) posting of last updated time and date, (10) legal disclaimer/privacy policy.

(H) Dialogic Loop properties. These properties (1) include contact information, (2) opportunity for user-response, (3) regular information available through e-mail and (4) things that can be requested by mail/e-mail.

(I) Playfulness: (1) games and (2) music.

(J) Media relations: (1) press releases, (2) community service information, (3) text of pastor's sermons, (4) speeches from congregation leaders and (5) clearly stated positions on policy issues.

(K) External relations: (1) feedback form and (2) guest book.

(L) Internal relations: (1) online sign-up for church activities, (2) printable sign-up for church activities, and (3) calendar events for entities other than the church.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Sample Demographics

The data were collected from December 17, 2007 through January 31, 2008. A total of 120 local congregations' Web sites affiliated with 12 religious organizations was analyzed. A random sample of 10 local congregations was selected from the overall religious organization. The religious organizations were all members of the Religious Communications Council organization: Baha'i Faith; Evangelical Lutheran Church; The Church of Christ, Scientist; International Society for Krishna Consciousness; United Church of Christ; National Baptist Convention, USA; Presbyterian Church, USA; Seventh Day Adventist Church; Southern Baptist Convention; The Church of Scientology; The United Methodist Church; and the US Catholic Church.

To address the research questions, a total of 74 variables were coded. The code values for these variables include 0 and 1, with "0" representing "information not included" on the Web site, and "1" representing "information included" on the Web site.

The first research question examines the content of church Web sites. The content was categorized into three main areas: evangelistic, denominational and organizational. Overall, the findings suggest that such organizational information as worship service times and church address/phone number have been found more frequently than other types of content on church Websites. The inclusion of denominational information was second. Denominational information was

deemed to be any item that listed information about the larger parent-organization to which they belonged. The evangelistic information appeared less frequently than any other content. For evangelistic information, the coders were looking for information that explained how to "be saved" or any other information that was geared towards proselytizing the visitors of the site.   A listing of all of the content variables is in Table 2.

Table 2

Number of Web Sites Containing Content Variables

	Frequency	Percentage
Presentation of "plan of salvation"	19	15.8
Text of Pastor's sermons available online	19	15.8
Bible study materials available on church's Web site	23	19.2
Worship Service Times	115	95.8
Church address/phone number	115	95.8
Photos of main church building	79	65.8
Listing of church staff	51	42.5
Special church event listing	52	43.3
Photos of other buildings	8	6.7
Church newsletter	29	24.2

Church policies	16	13.3
Link to denominational information	88	73.3
Other logos representing denomination	39	32.5
Denominational information on church site	52	43.3
Listing of Missions or service Opportunities	34	28.3
Links to Bible study material not on Church's site	47	39.2
Biography of Pastor	24	20
Biography of other staff	13	10.8
Church logo	37	30.8
Photos of church member activities	48	40

Research question 1a examines the material designed to convert/evangelize the user. Table 2 represents the breakdown of the variables in the evangelistic category. In regards to links to other religious information on the Web site (n=74, 61.7%), this was the largest category included on the Web sites. In regards to links to other religious information, the Web sites were coded for information relevant to workshops, testimonials, famous quotes or poetry, the visual arts, pamphlets, religious or spiritual texts. Only 15.8% (n=19) of the religious organizations included a link to evangelistic information or made available the pastor's sermons online. The evangelistic information was coded as a direct link to a "plan of salvation" or links to a track or pamphlet meant to proselytize the visitors. The pastor's sermons online could have been in the form of text, audio and/or video.

Table 3

Number of Web Sites Containing Material Designed to Convert/Evangelize the
User

Web Site Item	Frequency	Percent
Links to other religious information	74	61.7
Links to Bible study information not on church's Web site	47	39.2
Bible study information on site	23	19.2
Presentation of "plan of salvation"	19	15.8
Pastor's sermons available online	19	15.8

Research question 1b deals with content in relations to their
denominational information: links to denominational information (73.3%, n=88),
denominational information directly on the site (43.3%, n=52) and other logos
representing the denomination (32.5%, n=39). See table 4 for a listing of all
variables. In the assessment of the denominational variables, the sites that
included text outlining the history, mission, vision or purpose or other background
information about the denomination were coded as having denominational
information on the site. Conversely, the sites that did not include any textual
information, but included a link to the denomination's home page were coded as
having a link to the denominational information. In addition to the textual or link to
the denominational information, sites were coded for the inclusion of the
denominational logo on their local site.

Table 4

Number of Web Sites Containing Material Designed to Show the Church as

Allied with Denominational Information

	Frequency	Percentage
Link to denominational information	88	73.3
Denominational information on church site	52	43.3
Other logos representing denomination	39	32.5
Listing of missions or service opportunities	34	28.3

Research question 1c examined if the Web sites provided information that present the church as an organization. See table 5 for a listing of all variables. Local congregations seemed to realize that site visitors were looking for general information, such as worship service time (98.2%, n=115), their address and telephone number (98.2%, n=115), a listing of the church staff (42.5%, n=51), biography of the pastor or leader (20%, n=24), church newsletter (24.2%, n=29), church logo (30.8%, n=37), church policies (13.3%, n=16) and the biography of other staff (10.8%, n=13). The institutional information was the content most apparent on the Web sites.

Table 5

Number of Web Sites Containing Material Designed to Present the Church as an Organization

	Frequency	Percent
Worship service times	115	95.8
Church address/phone number	115	95.8
Photos of main church building	79	65.8
Church Mission Statement	69	57.5
Special church event listing	52	43.3
Listing of church staff	51	42.5
Photos of church member activities	48	40.0
Pastor's welcome to visitors	37	30.8
Church logo	37	30.8
Church newsletter	29	24.2
Biography of pastor	24	20.0
Church policies	16	13.3
Biography of other staff	13	10.8
Photos of other buildings (not main building)	8	6.7

Research question 2 deals with the functions that are provided to the public through the Web sites. The functions examined were usability, interactivity, up-to-dateness, and playfulness. The usability functions were more prevalent on the Web sites than the other functions. There were two usability functions that

appeared on 100% of the Web sites: minimal unwanted or intrusive ads and minimal loading time to download the whole page.

Table 6

Number of Web Sites Containing Usability Functions

	Frequency	Percent
Minimal unwanted or intrusive ads	120	100
Minimal loading time to download the whole page	120	100
Minimal pop-up windows	119	99.2
Low reliance on graphics	116	96.7
Minimal navigation menus	116	96.7
Major links to rest of site	113	94.2
Search engine	17	14.2
Short scrolls of text	96	80
Site map	11	9.2

Research question 2a examined the usability functions of the Web sites. In terms of usability, the sites were coded for the inclusion of site maps (9.2%, n=11), major links to rest of site (94.2%, n=113), search engines (14.2%, n=17), low reliance on graphics (96.7%, n=116) and short scrolls of text (80%, n=96). Over 95% of the sites possessed the following usability elements: minimal navigation menus (96.7%, n=116), minimal pop-up menus (99.2%, n=119),

minimal unwanted or intrusive ads (100%, n=120), and minimal loading time to download the whole page(100%, n=120). In the assessment of usability functions, the local congregation sites recognized the importance of having a Web site that was user friendly for the visiting publics.

Research question 2b dealt with the interactivity functions. In determining the interactivity functions present on the sites, the coders observed 55.8% included a "for more information" e-mail link. The sites' inclusion of additional e-mail addresses seemed to be consistent: pastor's e-mail (31.7%, n=38), other staff e-mail (29.2%, n=35) and the Web master's e-mail (19.2%, n=23). In the assessment of other interactive features, the sites included the following: the ability to submit prayer requests (12.5%, n=15), a feedback form (10%, n=12), online sign-up for church activities (5.8%, n=7), the ability to read prayer requests online (5%, n=6), and a guestbook (4.2%, n=5). In regard to RQ 2c, only a small percentage of the Websites included the posting of the last updated date and/or time (20.8%, n=25). A minute percentage of the sites included playfulness functions. Playfulness, research question 2d, was defined as the inclusion of games (0%, n=0) and music (5%, n=6) on the sites.

Research question 3 deals with building dialogic relationships. There are five key principles to dialogic relationships: dialogic loop, usefulness of information, generation of return visits, ease of interface, and conservation of visitors (see Table 7). Each of the principles was categorized into multiple variables. The research questions were patterned after Kent and Taylor's 2003 study of relationship building and Web sites.

Table 7

Number of Web Sites Containing Dialogic Relationship Variables

	Frequency	Percentage
Minimal loading time to download the whole page	120	100
Minimal number of unwanted ads	120	100
Church address/phone Number	115	95.8
Major links to the rest of the site	113	94.2
Weekly schedule information (non-worship)	106	88.3
Link to denominational information	88	73.3
Links to other religious information	74	61.7
Links to other Web sites	70	58.3
Church mission statement	69	57.5
For more information e-mail link	67	55.8
Statement of philosophy/mission	66	55
Denominational information on church site	52	43.3
Church history	50	41.7
Pastor's e-mail address	38	31.7
Pastor's welcome to visitors	37	30.8
Other staff e-mail addresses	35	29.2
Description of the church	34	28.3
Articles from news service or other publications	31	25.8
Community service information	28	23.3
Posting of last updated date and/or time	25	20.8

Web master's e-mail	23	19.2
Church policies	16	13.3
Speeches from congregation leaders (non pastor)	16	13.3
Downloadable information	15	12.5
Online donations	13	10.8
Feedback form	12	10
Legal disclaimer/privacy policy	11	9.2
Regular information available through e-mail	8	6.7
Online sign-up for church activities	7	5.8
Printable sign-ups for church activities	7	5.8
Ability to join the organization via online forms	6	5.0
Explicit statement inviting users to return	5	4.2
Guest Book	5	4.2
News forum	4	3.3
Press releases on evangelism	4	3.3
Things that can be requested by mail/e-mail	3	2.5
Calendar events for entities other than the church	1	.8
"Bookmark Now" option	0	0

The dialogic loop details tools that are used on the Web site to provide the public with an avenue to communicate with the organization. As to providing e-mail addresses to the publics, at least half of the sites included a "for information" e-mail link (55.8%, n=67). The sites also included the pastor's e-mail (31.7%,

n=38), other staff e-mails (29.2%, n=35) and the Webmaster's e-mail (19.2%, n=23).

With respect to the usefulness of information to the visiting publics, inclusion of the church address and telephone number (95.8%, n=115) was significant . Other variables included the e-mail addresses for the pastor, staff e-mails, and the Web master's e-mail, ability to join the organization on-line, policies, denominational information, online sign-up for church activities, printable sign-ups, downloadable information, regular information available through e-mail, and request for information via mail/e-mail (see Table 8).

Table 8

Number of Web Sites Possessing Useful Information

	Frequency	Percent
Church address/phone Number	115	95.8
Denominational information on church site	52	43.3
Pastor's e-mail address	38	31.7
Other staff e-mail addresses	35	29.2
Web master's e-mail	23	19.2
Church policies	16	13.3
Downloadable information	15	12.5
Online sign-up for church activities	7	5.8
Printable sign-up for church activities	7	5.8
Ability to join congregation online	6	5.0

Additionally, the sites were coded for the generation of return visits (3c).
Twelve variables were coded for this section. Table 9 details the variables
needed to help promote the generation of return visits. The data showed that
weekly schedule information (non-worship) was common amongst the sites. The
second most frequent feature included on the sites was the links to other
religious information. As stated earlier, the links to other religious information,
included information relevant to workshops, testimonials, famous quotes or
poetry, visual arts, pamphlets, religious or spiritual texts.

Table 9

Number of Web Sites Containing Return Visit Functions Variables

	Frequency	Percent
Weekly schedule information (non-worship)	106	88.3
Links to other religious information	74	61.7
Links to other Web sites	70	58.3
For more information e-mail link	67	55.8
Articles from news service or other publications	31	25.8
Posting of last updated date and/or time	25	20.8
Downloadable information	15	12.5
Regular information available through e-mail	8	6.7
Explicit statement inviting users to return	5	4.2
News forum	4	3.3
Things that can be requested by mail/e-mail	3	2.5
"Bookmark Now" option	0	0

The sites were coded for ease of interface (RQ 3d). Over 80% of the congregations coded utilized minimal loading time (100%, n=120), minimal unwanted ads (100%, n=120), minimal pop-up windows (99.2%, n=119), low reliance on graphics (96.7%, n=116), minimal navigation menus (96.7%, n=116), major links to the rest of the site (94.2%, n=113), short scrolls of text (80%, n=96). The inclusion of site maps (9.2%, n=11) and search engines (14.2%, n=17) were not as prevalent.

In regards to the conservation of visitors (RQ 3e), two variables were coded. The sites coded all contained a minimal number of unwanted ads (100%, n=120). In addition, 94.2 % (n=113) included major links to the rest of the site. These appeared to be a standard part of the local congregation sites.

By applying the five principles to the data gathered from the Web sites, it is clear that the religious congregations are not generating effective two-way communication with only 55% including an e-mail address on the site. This shows that the congregations continue to rely on traditional means of communications with 95.8% of the sites including a telephone number and address. The sites did a good job on making sure that the sites were easy to use (ease of interface).

The fourth research question examines how the church Web sites build relationships by targeting key audiences with the information present on the site. Approximately 25% (n=30) of the sites were shown to target the media public. The two variables on the sites that were coded are press releases and community service information. Fewer sites targeted external publics (13.3%,

n=16). Two variables were coded as targeting publics: feedback form and guest book. Even fewer sites targeted the internal publics (10.8%, n=13). Three variables were coded as targeting internal publics: online sign-up for church activities, printable sign-up for church activities and calendar events.

A Chi-Square test was run to find the relationship between the function elements and the internal, external and media public elements. The test proved to be inappropriate because the number of sites was not sufficient to meet the distribution requirements.

A Chi-Square test was also run to find the relationship between the content elements and the internal, external and media public elements. Once again, the test proved to be inappropriate because the number of sites was not sufficient to meet the distribution requirements.

A third Chi-Square test was run to find the relationship between content and functional elements. This test was also inappropriate because the number of sites was not sufficient to meet the distribution requirements.

According to an article by Jo and Jung (2005), they outlined variables from corporate Web sites that were used to determine if a Web site fit into one of J. Grunig's four public relations models: press agentry/publicity model, public information model, two-way asymmetrical model and two-way symmetrical model. Jo and Jung (2005) had nine variables that outlined the press agentry/publicity model, 18 variables outlined the public information model, one variable outlined the two-way asymmetrical model and two variables outlined the

two-way symmetrical model. The researcher modified the variables for this study

(see Table 10).

Table 10

Number of Web Sites Containing Variables for Determining Public Relations

Models

	Jo & Jung's Variables	Variables for this study	n	%
Press agentry/publicity model	Free products and services	Information that can be requested via mail/e-mail	3	2.5
		Regular information available through e-mail	8	6.7
	New products	N/a		
	Special offers	N/a		
	Product information	Plan of salvation	19	15.8
	Media coverage	N/a		
	Founder stories	History of the church	50	41.7
	Sweepstakes	N/a		
	Corporate advertising	N/a		
	Sports team information	N/a		
Public information model	Overview	Description of the church	34	28.3
	News releases	Press releases on evangelism	4	3.3
	General searches	Search Engines	17	14.2
	Investor searches	N/a		
	News search	N/a		

Job openings	N/a		
Contacts	General contact information	110	91.7
	Church address/phone number	115	95.8
	Listing of church staff	51	42.5
	Pastor's e-mail link	38	31.7
	Other staff e-mail	35	29.2
	Webmaster e-mail	23	19.2
FAQs	N/a		
Stock prices	N/a		
Investment tips	N/a		
Annual reports	N/a		
Site maps	Site maps	11	9.2
CEO messages	Text of Pastor's sermons	19	15.8
Executive profiles	Biographies of Pastor	24	20.0
	Biographies of other staff	13	10.8
Global networks	Link to denominational information	88	73.3
Subsidiaries and affiliates	Denominational information on site	52	43.3
Restructuring	N/a		
Events	Weekly schedule information	106	88.3
	Listing of special events	52	43.3
	Worship service times	115	95.8

Two-way asymmetrical	Survey	Online polls	1	0.8
Two-way symmetrical	Feedback	Feedback form	12	10.0
		Chat room	0	0.0
	Community involvement	N/a		

Research question 5 examined the public relations model represented by the Web sites. In regards to the press agentry/publicity model, 33.3% (n=40) of the sites included at least one variable. Only 10.8% of the sites included two variables. And fewer (1.7%) included three variables.

Of the seven variables coded for the public information model, only one site did not include any variables relative to this model. Twenty-five percent of the sites included at least three of the variables.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Summary of Findings

This section of study will summarize the findings to discuss the theoretical

and practical implications along with the limitation of this study and further

research direction. The overall findings of this study suggest that the majority of

the local religious congregations are not utilizing their Web sites to their

maximum potential. This finding correlates to the findings of Smith (2007). Even

though the sample size was small and not inclusive of all religious organizations,

the findings present interesting facts about the content and role of Web sites

within the congregations' communications plan.

The first research question asked, "What content do church Web sites

provide for their public?" In regards to content, the Web sites were coded for

three basic categories: evangelistic, denominational and organizational. Earlier

research by Sturgill (2004) found that the Web sites of the Southern Baptist

Churches examined first promoted the churches as organizations followed by the

evangelistic functions. On one hand, the results from this study corresponded

with Sturgill's study and found that the largest percentage was given to those

churches whose material presented them as organizations. On the other hand,

the results from this study found that the second highest percentage of content

was denominational, unlike the evangelistic content found in the previous study.

With the limited amount of research on the purpose of the content of

religious organization's Web sites, it is understandable that these local

congregation Web sites are still patterned after corporate America. Static information was presented such as the "demographics" of the local congregation: address, telephone number, e-mail addresses, staff information, worship service times, weekly schedule. This information establishes the presence of the local congregation and its operating procedures.

The presence of denominational information was the second highest percentage in terms of content. The presence of this information helps to show that the local congregation is aligned with a larger organization. This finding was quite different from the results from Sturgill, where the evangelistic information was second. Because of the existence of strong relationships with some denominations, the local congregations have included information about their governing body/head church. This is very crucial for a large number of churches. Undoubtedly, people have to relocate. Being associated with a denomination helps people who are looking for a congregation to join in a new city. The religious organization Web sites associated with this study all had a directory of congregations and basic contact information on their site

In a previous study by Capriotti and Moreno (2007), they examined corporate web sites. They concluded that "the websites assume a mainly unidirectional/expositive function, focusing on the presentation of the information content. A high predominance of expositive resources (graphics and audio) rather than interactive resources is observed, and there are no suitable feedback resources for interaction and dialogue with the different publics" (p. 89).

The presence of evangelistic information was surprisingly low. Only 15%

of the sites included a "plan of salvation." In Sturgill's study, 56% of the sites

included a plan of salvation. If the main goal of congregations is to proselytize

the unsaved, then why would the content of the Web sites not show it? Maybe

the goals of the Protestant church are not like that of other denominations.

Unfortunately, this study did not investigate the goals of the congregations being

studied to be able to draw this conclusion. But, this goes to show that the

Protestant congregations, in particular, are in need of a good model of a Web site

that is able to give them variables that they can include to reach the targeted

audiences no matter what the goal is.

Research question 2 dealt with the functions of the Web sites. The

functions were usability, interactivity, up-to-dateness, playfulness and

relationship-building or return visits. The usability functions were very high for the

majority of the Web sites. Each of the following variables was coded at 94% and

higher: minimal navigation menus, minimal pop-up menus, minimal unwanted or

intrusive ads, minimal loading time to download the entire page, low reliance on

graphics, and major links to the rest of the site. This is commendable. The

observation of the researcher is that these are standard functions. With the

perceived limited knowledge of the congregations' Web designers, the usability

levels should be high. Experienced Web designers typically created the more

complex sites.

The number of interactivity features of the sites was baseline. The majority

of the sites did not have discussion forums, chat room, online polls or online

surveys. Their number one method of interactivity was through e-mail. The one

thing that was not researched was the response time of the pastor, congregation leader, Webmaster or other staff members being e-mailed. The researchers have stated that just including an e-mail address without proper follow-up is futile. Interactivity involves two-way communication, synchronous or asynchronous. Song and Zinkhan (2008) found in their study about perceived interactivity that, "First, researchers should ensure that participants are involved in using the particular features of interest. Interactivity resides in the consumers' eyes, not in the system itself. Second, simply adding features does not guarantee a high level of interactivity" (p. 11). Hopefully, the sites that posted e-mail addresses were responding to the e-mails being received.

The playful function involved the inclusion of games and/or music on the sites. Only 5% of the sites had music either streaming automatically or had links to midi files on the page. The playfulness of a local congregation Web site was not an area of great concern. Most churches are not involved in the entertaining of the congregation or of visitors. The most playfulness that churches are involved in typically involves the youth ministry or division pages. Vest, Crowson and Pochran (2005) suggested that games are not appropriate on every site. They looked at a Web site for a financial institution. "Even a game that is similar to the theme of the site—like a first-person shooter that lets you blow away your debt obstacles—is out of place here; people are coming for financial help, not to play. Even if the client thinks games are cool and wants one on the site, it's best to advise against it" (Vest, Crowson & Pochran, 2005, p. 22). The same concept can be applied to the church Web sites.

The third research question asked, "How do churches build dialogic relationships through their Web pages?" This question 3 examined the relationship building efforts of the local congregations with their targeted audiences. Kent and Taylor (1998) suggested five principles for use when analyzing the Web for effective two-way communication. The five principles are dialogue or feedback, general usefulness of information, the generation of return visits, easy of interface, and the retention of visitors (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Naude et al., 2004; Kent, Taylor & White, 2003).

With this in mind, the Web sites coded were not using effective dialogue or feedback tools. Only 10% of the Web sites included a feedback form and fewer (5%) had a guest book. The main dialogue or feedback tool utilized was e-mail. The Web sites included the pastor's or church leader's e-mail address (38%) and other staff's e-mail addresses (35%). The study, however, did not evaluate the responses to the e-mail by the religious personnel. The research states that the inclusion of e-mail addresses on Web sites without having effective response times or key personnel in place to answer the e-mails is useless.

In regards to the usefulness of information, the sites were coded for information that was perceived to be useful to a visiting public, whether internal or external. The usefulness of content was based on the variables outlined by Kent & Taylor (1998) and adapted for religious congregations. The congregations seemed to place a high value on basic content being useful. The Web sites included basic contact information (95.8%), and also information about their denominational affiliation (43.3%). However, in regards to religious information,

the inclusion of useful content was not as high. Only 19.2 % of the sites included

Bible or religious text study information on the Web site. And fewer sites (15.8%)

included information to proselytize visitors (plan of salvation).

The variables that aid in the generation of return visits included up-to-date

information, special church event listings, sermons/speeches, church newsletter,

listing of missions/community service opportunities, news forums, downloadable

information and regular information available through e-mail. Kent and Taylor

(1998) suggest that Web sites that contain information that does not change are

of no use to the visiting public after the first visit. For the purposes of this study,

the Web sites were coded for the inclusion of "last updated" date and time being

shown on the homepage. Only a quarter of the sites included this information.

This is not to say that the information on the remainder of the sites was not

updated, but they did not have the date and time included. Likewise, only 19 Web

sites included the pastor's sermon (text, audio and/or video). This feature,

according to Kent & Taylor (1998) aids in the relationship building process. The

publics want to be able to identify with the head of any organization, therefore

featuring the pastor's sermons on a weekly or monthly basis will aid in generating

return visits.

The fourth research question asked, "How do church Web sites use

relationship building variables to target audiences?" The audiences were defined

as internal (members/staff), external (visitors) and the media. The data suggest

that the higher the content contained on a Web site, the more likely it was that

the Web site targeted the media. The same is true for the relationship between

internal or external publics and the content. When more functional variables were included on the Web site, the site was more geared to target internal publics. Also, when more content variables included, the internal publics were the targeted audience.

The findings suggest that content drives the audience being targeted. With the previous results showing that local congregation Web sites contained organizational-like content, it is not surprising that the basic information on the sites was more geared toward the media publics. In order to include more content that is geared toward the internal publics, the Web sites need to include online membership directories, online sign-up for activities, online literature study, sermons, and password restricted areas which are for members-only. This information is targeted for the internal publics, both staff and congregation members. This information, unfortunately, for the majority of the Web sites was not included.

Also, the findings suggest that in order to target external publics (visitors) to the site, the site, at a minimum, should have useful and updated information. This goes back to the basic dialogic principles. The local congregations are not creating Web sites that are generally appealing to the visiting publics. The information is static and unchanging. Therefore, the sites are useless and non-informational after the initial visit.

The fifth research question asked, "What public relations model do the church Web sites represent?" Grunig's public relations model was examined versus the principles of the Contingency Theory. In evaluating the Web sites, the

variables were categorized into the five models: press agentry, public

information, two-way symmetrical, two-way asymmetrical and the mixed-model.

The results indicated that 43.3% of the sites used the public information model.

Yet, an overwhelming number of the Web sites used the content and functions

representing a combination of the four basic models. This supports the theory of

contingency. Contingency believes that public relations is too complicated to be

placed into four or five basic models. There is a continuum of accomodation used

by public relations. Cameron et al. (1997) propose:

> Experienced professionals know that "it depends." We must always ask
>
> what is going to be the most effective method at a given time. True
>
> excellence in public relations may result from picking the appropriate point
>
> along the continuum that best fits the current need of the organization and
>
> its publics. (p. 35)

Kelleher (2007) suggests that the contingency theory is the "it depends" theory.

He proposes that "online media are giving us new opportunities to practice more

two-way, symmetrical, facilitative, dialogic, conversational public relations" (p. 53).

Theoretical and Practical Implications

This study builds upon the previous research of church Web sites by

adding a public relations perspective. The previous research just categorized the

content of religious congregations' Web sites without evaluating the audiences

being targeted or the public relations model being employed. With the findings

from this study, specific content has been assembled from various research

about corporate America's Web sites and fused with a religious perspective.

The content of the Web sites needs to be improved. Based on the beliefs

of the denomination and the location of the local congregation, the content of the

sites should be more reflective of a religious organization, than that of a typical

business organization. The information needs to be inline with the overall goals

and objectives of the local congregations.

Having a Web site that is useful is a great addition to any organization,

profit and not-for-profit. Just like any corporations, the ability to use all avenues of

communication to "establish a mutually beneficial relationship" may be essential

for the religious community to have a more prominent place on the World Wide

Web (Grunig, 1992, p.4)

Since the majority of the Web sites did not focus on any particular

audience, this study will aid in the production of a manual that will list the

elements that could be included to help the congregations in their planning

stages. A checklist of Web site design features needs to be formulated. This

checklist would include the creation of a communications plan, target audiences,

and elements to include in relation to content and function.

The Web sites coded in this study did not represent the two-way

symmetrical model Grunig has established and suggested as most effective,

ethical and excellent. In general, these sites were merely informational and did

not even attempt to engage the user in any type of communication except via e-

mail. Most Web sites also show a hybrid of the four models in terms of content

and functions.

Even though public relations practitioners were employed by the early

church, it is staggering to see how the modern church has strayed from the practice of hiring professionals throughout the years. Smith (2007) also found that "few of the organizations employed an Internet professional to oversee and maintain the sites" (p. 285). But, there is hope. The Religious Communicators Council is evidence that more denominations (at least at the national level) are employing religious public relations practitioners or communication directors to aid in their overall communication planning. The problem is that, for the most part, these practitioners and directors are not being used or allowed to function at the local level. Local congregations find that they must fend for themselves in relations to all public relations strategies and practices.

The one thing that is clear – the digital divide is not prevalent in the majority of congregations of the sites coded. With the low percentages of congregations offering the ability to sign-up for activities on-line or to even make available downloadable information shows that the majority of the communication process is still on a face-to-face level of the church. The local body of congregations still believes in corporate worship and literature study. This is can also be seen with the low numbers of sites including the sermons/speeches, and study information on the site or accessible through a link. It is safe to assume that the weekly bulletin or church newsletter is probably the first source for any and all church information. Kelleher (2007) wrote:

> Although face-to-face communication is still the gold standard, having
>
> access to richer media makes work easier for those trying to establish and
>
> maintain relationships online. Of course, both the public relations

practitioner and the people she wants to communicate with must have

access for these technologies to work. You might have an awesome video

conferencing setup at your office, but it will not do you much good if the

people you want to communicate with don't have access on the other end.

(p. 61)

The study has tremendous possibilities. Religion and culture have been

linked together throughout time. Our culture today is one defined by our

technological advances. The church is not immune to technology. In fact, the

church should embrace technology. To this end, churches need a road map, a

guide to help them maneuver through the vast amounts of information in regards

to the accurate and acceptable uses of the technologies available. This includes

the preparation and maintenance of their Web sites. A manual needs to be

created that details the different variables that can and/or should be included on

the sites to help the congregations reach their goals for the sites. It is no longer

acceptable to just have a Web presence. That presence needs to have a

purpose.

Vroom (1989) "compared the major religions of the world and concluded

that although each has a different worldview, each of these world views has

common elements" (as included in Grunig, 1992, p.36). The study emphasizes

the need of the local congregations to invest in the content on their Web sites.

The need to establish the targeted audiences and to include information that

appeals to each of the groups is necessary.

Limitations to the Study and Further Research Direction

The study could have benefited from a more in-depth analysis of the variables of the Web sites with a larger sample; however, because of the limited previous research and the complexity of altering present studies targeting corporate America to religious themes, the scope of study was limited. Several limitations of this study were due to the very nature of the instrument being analyzed: Web sites. One limitation was the fact that Web sites change constantly. There was a strong possibility that a Web site coded one day could be updated, changed or even taken down by the next day, although the updateness of the Web sites of religious organizations are not comparable to corporate Web sites. A longitudinal study of Web sites could provide further information on the changing trends. A study of this nature would allow the researcher to effectively see the rate of change in the information on the homepage, instead of just relying on the inclusion of an up-to-date text feature on the page.

This study included only those religious organizations that were members of the RCC. There are many other religious organizations in the United States that were not represented. The related limitation was the limited database of local congregations on their national religious organizational Web sites. A different or larger sample will offer further insight into the findings of this study.

This study examined the homepages as well as those pages that were one click away. Future studies may want to focus on the homepages separately from the entire site to get a comparison of the main information on the Web sites

that would be of interest to various publics and compare them with other links.

Further study is needed to determine specific target audiences. Smith (2007) found that the religious organizations analyzed could not detail who the users of their sites were. Only two of the sites Smith examined even had statistical data about the number of visitors to the site. It is important to understand the audience, so that features can be included that appeal to them. Will and Callison (2006) found in their analysis of higher education Web sites that " a greater portion of homepages was organized by a combination of functions and target audiences, suggesting that higher education institutions realize it is critical to target audiences on the homepage" (p. 182). The nonprofit religious organizations are going to have to follow the examples of these higher education sites by determining the target audiences and the content and function that appeal to them.

This study did not go into great detail in defining variables that identified key target audiences. This could be done via a survey or by interviewing the users of the site by including the survey on the homepage of the Web site. The internal publics should be broken into two categories: members and staff. Additionally, future studies should evaluate the use of the Web site by the publics. A survey should be given to internal and external publics about their usage of the Web site.

In addition to target audiences, a further study could include information that details the perception of the role of the Web sites by the dominant coalition and the web designers/managers. This information holds the key to how, when

and what content and functions are included on the sites. Once, the information is gathered, these persons could be educated about the different public relations theories and tactics that could be used to enhance their individual sites. It is the opinion of the researcher, that the Web sites that use onsite staff to manage the sites are less sophisticated, in terms of content and function, than those that outsource this job.

In conclusion, the study presented findings that demonstrated the need for future studies dealing with religious public relations and Web sites. It went beyond the scope of just categorization and took it a step further by classifying the content and functions in relation to public relations theories. This study also increased the awareness that religious Web sites need to be created based on the findings of the data: research of target audiences, inclusion of dialogic and relationship building principles and purposeful content and functions.

APPENDIX A

WEB SITE CODING SHEET SAMPLE

Coder Name_____

Name of the Religious Organization_____

URL _____

Date _____

Does the Web site have the following item?

	Item	Yes	No
1	Links to other religious information		
2	Presentation of "plan of salvation" (link and direct)		
3	Link to study materials not on church's Web site		
4	Text of sermons available online		
5	Study materials available on church's Web site		
6	Worship service times		
7	Church address/phone number		
8	Photos of main church building		
9	Weekly schedule information (nonworship)		
10	Listing of church staff		
11	Special church event listing		
12	Church mission statement		
13	Photos of other buildings		
14	Biography of pastor		
15	Biography of other staff		
16	Pastor's welcome to visitors		
17	Church logo		
18	Photos of church activities		
19	Church newsletter		
20	Church policies		
21	For more information e-mail link		
22	Pastor e-mail		
23	Other staff e-mail		
24	Webmaster e-mail		

25	Ability to submit prayer requests		
26	BBS or guest book		
27	Ability to read prayer requests		
28	Feedback form		
29	Online sign-up for church activities		
30	Printable sign-ups for church activities		
31	Online donations		
32	Link to denominational information		
33	Other logos		
34	Denominational information on church site		
35	Listing of missions or service opportunities		
36	Articles from news service or other publications		
37	Calendar events for entities other than the church		

38	Site Map		
39	Major links to rest of site		
40	Search engine		
41	Low reliance on graphics		
42	Short scrolls of text		
43	Minimal navigation menus		
44	Minimal pop-up windows		
45	Minimal unwanted or intrusive ads		
46	Minimal loading time to download the whole page		
47	Press releases		
48	Speeches from congregation leader		
49	Downloadable graphics		
50	Clearly stated positions on policy issues		
51	Community service information		
52	Statement of philosophy/mission		
53	Church history		
54	Description of church		
55	Posting of last updated date and time		
56	Links to other Web sites		
57	Explicit statement inviting users to return		
58	News forum		
59	Legal disclaimer/privacy policy		
60	"Bookmark now" option		
61	Calendar of events		
62	Downloadable information		
63	Discussion forums		
64	Chat rooms		
65	Online polls		
66	Online surveys		
67	Ability to join the organization via online forms		
68	Contact information		

69	Opportunity for user-response		
70	Regular information available through e-mail		
71	Things that can be requested by mail/e-mail		
72	Games		
73	Music		
74	Other		

APPENDIX B

CODEBOOK AND DEFINITION OF TERMS

The codebook serves to assist coders in the process of coding religious

organizations' Web sites. All of the variables will be defined based on their use

in this study. Coders should refer to the definitions outlined in this codebook

when coding. No other alternative definitions are to be used.

General Remark

This is a content analysis of the content and purpose of religious congregations'

Web sites. This study seeks to establish the actual purpose of the Web sites

based on the elements/tools that are included on each of the Web sites. The

coders' job in this study is to examine the randomly selected Web sites and code

them based on the coding sheet.

Examination Process

Coders are to browse the randomly selected religious congregation Web sites.

The analysis of the Web sites may take up to one hour. Begin with the

information included on the homepage. Place an "X" in either the "yes" or "no"

box next to the variable being coded. Coders pay attention to code the correct

Web site when clicking on active links.

Conceptual Definition

1. Links to other religious information – any links to religious information

relevant to workshops, testimonials, famous quotes or poetry, art work,

pamphlets, religious or spiritual texts information not directly on the site

2. Presentation of "plan of salvation" (link or direct) – information about

how to become a believer in that particular faith. This information can be a link that directs you to another Web site or a direct link to information (such as a pdf file).

3. Link to Bible study materials, not on church's Web site – an active link that takes you away from the church's Web site (i.e. book store, author's page, etc.) that includes Bible study information.

4. Text of pastor's sermons available online – This refers to a written text, streaming audio and/or video, links to a live or archived radio program of the pastor's sermon.

5. Bible study materials available on church's Web site – This refers to being able to purchase, download or view Bible study material on the church's Web site.

6. Worship service times – This information (dates, times, room locations, etc.) can be included by itself or as a part of the church's calendar.

7. Church address/phone number – This is the contact information for the church – a physical address and telephone number.

8. Photos of main church building – This refers to pictures of the church (interior or exterior) and three-dimensional or 360° images.

9. Weekly schedule information (non-worship) – This is a listing of the organization's activities, except worship service information. It can be displayed in a daily, weekly or monthly format.

10. Listing of church staff – This is just a simple listing of church staff (with or without pictures).

11. Special church event listings – This is an events list outside of the church calendar – a special announcement block or events section of the Web site.

12. Church mission statement – This is a statement of the church's mission statement.

13. Photos of other buildings – These are pictures of other church related buildings, outside of the main worship facility (i.e. Family life centers, senior citizens' home owned by the church, etc.)

14. Biography of Pastor – background information about the pastor (resume, bio, etc.)

15. Biography of other staff – background information about other staff members (resume, bio, etc.)

16. Pastor's welcome to visitors – a welcome message from the pastor (text, audio or video) specifically targeting the visitors to the site.

17. Church logo -- A recognizable graphic design element, representing an organization or product

18. Photos of church activities – a photo gallery or page(s) with photographs of church events.

19. Church newsletter – a pdf or text file of the church's newsletter.

20. Church policies – a pdf or Web page that outlines policies that relate to the church or the church's position taken on a topic.

21. For more information e-mail link – an active link that users can click on to request more information about the church or events relative to the

church.

22. Pastor's e-mail – a link or text that displays the pastor's e-mail address

23. Other staff e-mails – a link or text that displays the e-mail addresses of other staff members.

24. Web master e-mail – a link or text that displays the e-mail address of the Web master.

25. Ability to submit prayer requests – a link or form that allows users to submit a prayer request or an e-mail address where requests can be submitted.

26. Guest book – a link that allows users to leave comments in a "guest book."

27. Ability to read prayer requests – users have an ability to read the other prayer requests that have been submitted.

28. Feedback form – a form on the Web site that allows users to leave feedback information about various issues.

29. Online sign-up for church activities – a link or links on the Web site that allow users to sign-up online for different activities/events. This can be included on the site or on a third-party site.

30. Printable sign-ups for church activities – a pdf or text file that a user can print off to sign-up for different activities/events.

31. Online donations – a link on the Website that allows users to donate funds electronically.

32. Link to denominational information on church site – an active link that

takes the user to the national denomination's Web site.

33. Other logos – other logos that represent different organizations that the

church is affiliated with..

34. Denominational information on the church site – text information about

the denomination on the Web site (not a link to the denomination's

Web site).

35. Listing of missions or service opportunities – a listing of mission

opportunities or service opportunities that are sponsored by the

church.

36. Articles from news service or other publications – pdf files or text files

or articles from news services or other publications.

37. Calendar events for entities other than the church – calendar events

that are listed that are not sponsored directly by the church, but may

be sponsored by other non-profit organizations or are community-

related.

38. Site map – a site map included on the site to show the structure/layout

of the site.

39. Major links to rest of site – buttons or hyperlinked text other than

navigational buttons that link to other parts of the site.

40. Search engine – a search tool included on the site that searches the

internal site not the entire Internet.

41. Low reliance on graphics – no more than 5 graphics, not including

navigational tools or buttons.

42. Short scrolls of text – it takes no more than 10 seconds to read.

43. Minimal navigation menus – no more than one vertical and/or one horizontal.

44. Minimal pop-up windows – no more than two.

45. Minimal unwanted or intrusive ads – no more than one.

46. Minimal loading time to download the whole page – taking no more than 1 – 2 seconds.

47. Press releases – the presence of press releases on the site.

48. Speeches from congregations leader – this includes text, audio or video files from leaders other than the pastor.

49. Downloadable graphics – graphics available for the user to download.

50. Clearly stated positions on policy issues – policy issues include information about the operations and governance of the church.

51. Community service information – information dealing with community service opportunities (i.e. feeding the hungry, clothing the homeless, community Bible study, Habitat for Humanity, etc.).

52. Statement of philosophy/mission – the religious congregation's philosophy or mission statement.

53. Church history – the history of the church included.

54. Description of the church – a brief overview about the church.

55. Posting of last updated date and time – a text item located on the homepage which includes the date and time when the page was last updated.

56. Links to other Web sites – links to other Web sites (non-religious) to other information. For example, links to art galleries, weather stations, local radio stations, local television stations, etc.)

57. Explicit statement inviting users to return -- a statement on the site specifically inviting users to visit the site again.

58. News forum – a forum for posting and discussing current news or issues.

59. Legal disclaimer/privacy policy – a statement on the site explaining any legal information or privacy policy associated with the site.

60. "Bookmark Now" option – this feature allows the user to select this site as a favorite site, for ease in returning to the site later.

61. Calendar of events – either in a monthly, weekly, or day format (interactive or pdf).

62. Downloadable information – information about or from the church about church events that can be downloaded by the user.

63. Discussion forums – discussion boards for the users to be able to interact and discuss issues/topics.

64. Chat room(s) – an area on the site that allows publics and/or staff members to communicate synchronously about a specific topic or various topics.

65. Online polls – the user's ability to vote on various topics/issues

66. Online surveys – the user's ability to participate in an online survey

67. Ability to join the congregation via online forms – the ability to join the

religious congregation online

68. Contact information – church address, telephone, e-mail addresses for church staff.

69. Opportunity for user-response – The ability for the user to leave feedback on the Website or via e-mail.

70. Regular information available through e-mail – an e-newsletter sign-up box.

71. Things that can be requested by mail/e-mail – the ability for users to request additional information about the religious organization via mail/e-mail.

72. Games – any game that may be played on the Web site.

73. Music – music that is either played automatically upon entering the site or a file that can be played on the site.

74. Other – this category is open and used for any item that was not accounted for as a variable.

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